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**CHURCH AS COMMUNITY:
THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS AND
DEVELOPMENT IN PRACTICE**

Anne Marie Codd

A thesis presented for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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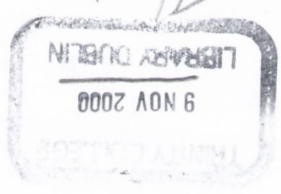
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To my mother

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SUMMARY

Since human beings are historical in nature it follows that the church, as a community, exists in time and place. Part I of the dissertation identifies a tradition, time and place in relation to which this study of church as community will be done. It is a historical and sociological exploration of the Roman Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland¹, 2000 years or so after Christ.

Since the 1960s this Church has been characterised by rapid and extensive change which illustrates the interrelatedness of the self-understanding of religious believers and their socio-historical contexts. Trajectories of the changes in Irish society and in the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland are traced. Theoretical perspectives are taken through a discussion of the sociology of religion in Irish society. Patterns of religious belief and practice are studied against a background of economic development, and social and cultural transformations.

The vast majority of the population of Ireland are affiliated to the Roman Catholic Church, and until the 1960s their allegiance was largely unquestioned. From the research reviewed here it emerges that they still profess high levels of religious faith. At the same time, they show a decreasing commitment to Church attendance and a growing autonomy in relation to Church authority. Irish society is characterised by progress combined with a significant degree of polarisation. The question follows: How is the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland to understand itself in this context? How, in particular, is the parish community, where Church is most immediately and concretely realisable, to structure its life and fulfil its mission?

¹ Throughout the dissertation 'Ireland' will be used to indicate the Republic of Ireland. Whereas the Roman Catholic Church is organised on an all-Ireland basis, the historical, social and political context of Church in northern Ireland is such that it would entail a separate study.

In Part II the theological foundations of church as community are explored systematically. The developing self-understanding and structures of the church in New Testament and early patristic sources of the pre-Constantinian period are examined. Notwithstanding the necessary diversity in varying social and cultural contexts, universal and distinctive normative characteristics of Christian community emerge. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) reflected on the life and mission of the church for its time. A critical review of the ecclesiology of the Council highlights its understanding of the church as the sacrament of union with God and unity of humanity and its renewed emphasis on the local church, while retaining at the same time a strong theme of *communio* between churches and within the one church of Christ. Rahner's theology of the parish is outlined, and it is argued that his vision is supported at least implicitly by Vatican II. In this light, the parish is understood as the actualisation of church in time and place, in communion with the Church universal.

The third part of the dissertation considers the implications for the parish in Ireland today of the sociological and theological analyses which have been presented. It brings into focus, in turn, the parish as a faith-community, as a community of service and, as a realisation of church with a mission, an organisation requiring structure and leadership. The four-fold scheme of *koinonia, martyria, leitourgia and diakonia* (the normative characteristics referred to above) is used to examine how the parish may effectively be an actualisation of the church universal. The outcome is offered as a possible guide to on-going praxis, i.e. to the processes of discernment, planning, action and evaluation in the parish.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AA	<i>Apostolicam Actuositatem</i>
AAS	<i>Acta Apostolicae Sedis</i>
AG	<i>Ad gentes</i>
ANF	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
ARCIC	Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission
CD	<i>Christus dominus</i>
CELAM	The Episcopal Council of Latin America
CIC	<i>The Code of Canon Law</i>
CL	<i>Christifideles laici</i>
CMRS	Conference of Major Religious Superiors (now CORI)
CORI	Conference of Religious of Ireland (formerly (CMRS))
CSO	Central Statistics Office
CRD	The Centre for Research and Development
CTSA	Catholic Theological Society of America
EVSSG	European Values Systems Study Group
LG	<i>Lumen gentium</i>
MC	<i>Mystici corporis</i>
MRBI	Market Research Bureau of Ireland
NCPI	National Council of Priests of Ireland
NPNF	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i>
PC	<i>Perfectae caritatis</i>
PO	<i>Presbyterorum ordinandis</i>
RTE	Radio Telefís Éireann (Ireland's National Television Station)
SC	<i>Sacrosanctum concilium</i>
SRU	Social Research Unit
TI	<i>Theological Investigations</i>
TS	<i>Theological Studies</i>
UR	<i>Unitatis redintegratio</i>

INTRODUCTION

It is my intention in this dissertation to bring together in a unified study the principal sociological, theological and pastoral dimensions of the Roman Catholic parish in its present-day setting in the Republic of Ireland. Thus, my aim is to situate the parish within an on-going dialogue of mutual critique between the Christian church and its social context. The theology and practice of parish life, mission and ministry have been the subject of enquiry and experimentation in Ireland since Vatican II. The need to adapt pastoral practice to changing circumstances is widely acknowledged. Not so the challenge of continually interpreting not only the mission but also the message of the gospel in the light of the Christian tradition within the existential social reality of its context. It is this challenge that motivates the dissertation.

The Roman Catholic Church in Ireland was largely unaffected by the renewal movements within Catholic theology which were stirring in Europe in the early twentieth century. Even those liturgical reforms which were promulgated by Rome were sometimes resisted. This insularity is understandable in the light of the political and economic situation of the country at the time. The struggle to emerge from eight centuries of colonial rule, which from the sixteenth century had been greatly compounded by the complexities of denominationalism, has marked Ireland before and since the declaration of the Free State in 1922.

Between the early 1960s and the 1990s, Irish society moved through a process of unprecedented change. Urbanisation and industrialisation came late to this island, previously a largely rural, agricultural country. Greatly extended access to the mass media, enlarged educational opportunity (for girls as well as boys), together with increased mobility, have progressively removed the insularity of earlier times, when those who had left for foreign places did not generally return or greatly

influence the outlook or prospects of those who stayed at home. Entry first into the economic, and later the social and cultural milieu of Europe has provided a new context within which to read the traditions, including the religious traditions, of the country. Increased affluence is significantly affecting the profile of Irish society of the present day. Many people have choices regarding lifestyle that were unknown to previous generations. Yet whole sections of the society experience a “growing exclusion”¹.

These socio-cultural characteristics of present-day Irish society will be outlined in the first chapter of the dissertation. It will be observed that the position of the Roman Catholic Church, the church of the vast majority of the population, is being dramatically affected by social change in Ireland. The conception of what religion is has been undergoing transformations which may be characterised in terms of the sociology of religion, and an overview of this process, in the Irish context, is included as Chapter 2. Empirical evidence of change is to be found in ten surveys of religious beliefs, practice and attitude which have been carried out by a variety of agencies between 1974 and 1998. These are reviewed in Chapter 3.

In order to explore the theological foundations of Christian community the sources which will be studied in Part II of the dissertation are: (1) the emerging theology of church in the New Testament and the early Christian Fathers, and (2) the ecclesiology of Vatican II, which, it will be observed, marks a significant point of development in the self-understanding of post-Reformation Catholicism. The Council’s emphasis on the local church as the locus of the life and mission of Christian communities will be explored as the foundations for a practical theology of the life and mission of the parish community.

¹ See *Growing Exclusion*, CORI (then CMRS) Justice Commission, 1993, on the issue of increasing polarisation of Irish society.

Following a brief overview of the hermeneutical issues involved, the self-understanding of the churches of the first centuries will be explored through a study, in chapter 4, of New Testament and early patristic sources. Across their historical diversity, complementary and unifying themes become evident. At the same time, it will be argued that the self-understanding of the Christian church through the ages must be constantly and critically reviewed, and traits of the very earliest communities which were submerged in the evolving structures must be continually retrieved. In the closing section of chapter 4 the normative characteristics of Christian community which emerge from the biblical and other early sources are discussed. Those who claim to follow Jesus Christ must, in each situation and in all times, guide their lives and review their practice by the quality of their *koinonia*, *martyria*, *leitourgia*, and *diakonia* i.e. their Christian fellowship, their fidelity to the apostolic message, the authenticity of their worship and the effectiveness of their service.

Within the Roman Catholic tradition the second Vatican Council, 1962-65, offered to the church world-wide a focusing point, at which the experience of the past, the challenge of the present and planning for the future could be brought together. The ecclesiology of Vatican II will be examined critically in chapter 5. Major polarities in the understanding of church which are represented in the Council documents, such as charism and institution, and the church local and universal will be discussed. A theology of church as sacrament of union with God and unity of humanity offers, it will be claimed, an effective mediation between life and structure in ecclesial life and practice. That catholicity requires diversity and that unity can be preserved through a relationship of *communio* are recurring themes in Vatican II. The invitation of the Council to national and regional churches to interpret their life and mission in terms of their own contexts, as expression of the mission of the

universal church, has to be *received* in order to effect development. Some patterns in the reception of Vatican II will be traced, as well as the evolving disposition of the Roman ecclesiastical authorities in the forty years since the Council. Finally, the potential for ecumenical dialogue of the Council's renewed emphasis on the local church is highlighted.

The hermeneutical issues relating to the reading of Vatican II as a guide for the self-understanding of church in its varied world contexts, and changing with time, are discussed in the opening section of chapter 6. The church's relationship with culture is addressed in the Council documents, and a strong emphasis is laid on the need for inculturation into local idiom and circumstances, including socio-economic and political. At the same time the tension between judicious adaptation and uncritical assimilation is recognised. The inculturation debate is discussed as a background to the theology of life and mission of the parish community, which is required if the dissertation is to achieve its purpose. Church as community means church as people, who by nature abide in time and place. Hence church as community is primarily local church, especially when it becomes 'event', in Karl Rahner's terminology, in the celebration of the Eucharist. In practice the local church finds its most immediate and concrete realisation in the parish. It is argued in the final section of chapter 6 that this deduction, which takes its cue from the theology of Karl Rahner, is supported implicitly by the Second Vatican Council.

The focus of the third and final part of the study is the parish as it exists in present-day Irish society. Characteristics of a parish vary with location, be it rural, semi-urban or urban. Irish society as a whole has become 'urbanised' in terms of its lifestyles, its access to information and resources and its communication networks. Social isolation is now much more a matter of economics and culture than of

geography. Parishes within communities of high deprivation need to be considered as special cases. While the experience of ministry in some such parishes provide important reflections, the dissertation applies more generally to those parishes whose communities are of mixed composition in terms of the socio-economic status of their members.

The development in practice of the Christian community within the context of parish, understanding itself as the self-actualisation in its time and place of the church universal, will be discussed in three chapters. While these are not independent of one another, they do bring into focus different 'planes' of parish life, namely: the parish community as a community of believers (chapter 7), as a community of service (chapter 8), and as a local realisation of the church with a mission requiring organisation and leadership (chapter 9). In each chapter, the guiding scheme which was highlighted in chapter 4, namely *koinonia*, *martyria*, *leitourgia* and *diakonia*, will be invoked.

The programme which is presented is not only aspirational. It also reflects the efforts of many parishes in Ireland which are endeavouring to implement a theology of church as community and of the parish community as the realisation in its context of the church universal. In Holy Family Parish, Askea, Carlow, for example, the first ten years of its existence have been marked by sustained effort on the part of a core of the community with its pastoral leadership team, working towards its stated dream: to be a parish community which is inclusive, to be a community whose members care for one another and the whole human family, and to be a parish community which celebrates and nourishes its Christian life together in the Sunday Eucharist. While I was aware of the impact of my own experience in Holy Family Parish, the discussions, positions and proposals contained in Chapters 7,

8 and 9 are primarily the outcome of focusing the sociological and theological analyses of the dissertation on the church as it is realised, concretely and immediately, in the local parish community.

Chapter 1

THE HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN IRELAND

The purpose of this chapter is to offer a critical reflection on the social context in which the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland presently finds itself. Historians and social scientists are agreed that the 1960s marked, in the words of one leading historian, ‘some sort of watershed in Irish history’.¹ Three highly significant, interrelated trajectories of change in Irish society will be traced from the beginning of the 1960s to the present time.

The primary strand of change in Ireland of the 1960s was political and economic. The Irish economy was at a low ebb in the 1950s. Internal government policies were preventing the post-war recovery in Europe from impacting on Ireland. However, by 1958-59, plans for a new industrialisation were beginning to take shape. Patterns of urbanisation, of gradually increasing affluence and of mobility would follow. The introduction in 1966 of free, compulsory second-level education and the subsequent expansion of opportunities and take-up of third-level education and training can be interpreted as part of this development. With economic expansion, social and cultural implications were to be expected. New opportunities were opened up, especially for young people. New awareness was also generated among women regarding their role in society and their equal rights as citizens, and while at first progress was slow, the process was irreversible. Because of their implications for the patterns of religious belief and practice, I will explore in the first section of this chapter the industrial development, the increased educational opportunity and the

¹ J.J. Lee, ‘Continuity and Change in Ireland, 1945-70’[‘Continuity and Change’], *Ireland, 1945-70*, J.J. Lee (ed.), Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1979, p. 166.

women's movement in Ireland during the last four decades.

The second major trajectory of change in Irish society of the 1960s was cultural, and can be symbolised by the launching in 1961 of Telefís Éireann, Ireland's first national television station, an event which led to unprecedented access to pluralistic cultures of the world. This development was in fact part of a wider expansion in the media generally, in literature and the arts. The impact of this new level of exposure was felt especially in the inter-generational transmission of culture and tradition, including the 'traditional' Catholic faith and values which had informed life in Ireland to a very considerable extent. I will try to highlight in the second section of this chapter the extent of the upheaval in the structures of communication in Irish society which has taken place since the 1960s.

Thirdly, between 1962 and 1965 the Second Vatican Council was taking place in Rome. There, the self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church, its relationship with other Christians, with other religions and the world were being examined in depth. Within the Catholic Church in Ireland, too, questions were arising regarding old certainties, the relationship of religion to life in modern society and the role of the Church in the affairs of the modern state. I will discuss the direction and scope of this new critical stance of Irish Catholics vis-à-vis their Church in the closing section of the chapter.

1.1 ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL EXPANSION

1.1.1 Industrial Development

When Seán Lemass succeeded Eamonn de Valera as Taoiseach (Prime Minister) in 1959, he finally had the opportunity he had been waiting for while Minister for Industry and Commerce to promote industrial development in Ireland. It is true that *Economic Development* and the *White Paper on Economic Expansion*, published in

1958 by T.K. Whitaker, the newly-appointed secretary of the Department of Finance, had been well received among informed observers. The lack of employment opportunities and a high emigration rate, which had characterised the 1950s, required a radical review of economic policies. However, the break with de Valera's insular, agricultural Ireland to which these documents were pointed would not come about without a concerted effort on the part of government and favourable external trading conditions. The change from protectionism to free trade would take time. Nevertheless, between 1958 and 1963 the national output increased by nearly 25 per cent, unemployment fell by 33 per cent, opportunities for women to work outside the home were increased, and emigration was reduced by 40 per cent.²

The First Programme for Economic Expansion covering the years 1959 to 1963 achieved its goal of reversing the trends of the 1950s. The Second Programme, for 1964 to 1970, was more ambitious. It leaned heavily on entry to the European Economic Community by 1970. Fears relating to Ireland's neutrality, the close links between the Irish economy and that of Britain³ as well as fears regarding the stability of the economy blocked Ireland's entry until 1973.

The industrialisation process has continued uninterrupted, despite fluctuations, into the present. In 1986 Wickham, reviewing change from a sociological perspective, observed:

[o]ver the last fifty years the most fundamental change in the occupational structure as a whole has been the falling number of people who gain their livelihood from their own (small) property, working for themselves or for their family on a farm, shop or small business. ... While in 1926 such people comprised just under a half of the workforce, in 1979 they amounted to less than a quarter. Equally, the fastest growing occupations over the same period have been skilled manual workers, white-collar and professional

² John A. Murphy, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, Dublin; Gill and Macmillan, 1989, p. 144.

³ A new Anglo-Irish trade agreement was signed in 1960

employees.⁴

Industrialisation and economic expansion led to a revamping of the class structure in Irish society during the 1960s and 1970s⁵. Many of the new work-roles which were becoming available were accessible only to those with the advantage of education and training, and hitherto such education and training had not then been equally available to all⁶. The resulting polarisation of Irish society was consolidated by the prolonged recessions in the 1980s and the early 1990s. Emigration no longer provided a solution to the problem. High levels of unemployment had a serious impact on the populations of Irish towns and cities now dependent on industries, many of which were part of multinational corporations.⁷ At the same time heightened expectations and awareness of differentials in society had given rise to a sense of a growing exclusion on the part of the poor.⁸ In the late 90s with the remarkable upturn of the economy, it is the problem of the long-term unemployed which is now judged to be the most intractable. Furthermore, as has been noted by social researchers such as Breen, these are very likely to belong in households who are thereby consigned to poverty.⁹ By contrast with a situation in pre-1960s where the economic issues related to *production* of wealth, there is now a situation where

⁴ 'Industrialisation, Work and Unemployment' in *Ireland: A Sociological Profile*, Dublin: IPA, 1986, p. 78.

⁵ cf. M. Hornsby-Smith and C. Whelan, 'Religious and Moral Values' *Values and Social Change in Ireland*, C. Whelan (ed.) Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994, p. 15

⁶ See below p. 10.

⁷ In 1986 over a third of the workforce in manufacturing industry was employed by foreign companies. See Wickham, 'Industrialisation, Work and Unemployment', *Ireland: a Sociological Profile*, P. Clancy et al (eds), Dublin: IPA, 1986, p. 74.

⁸ Poverty and its measurement are of course matters for detailed discussion among social scientists. See for example T. Callan and B. Nolan 'The Meaning and Measurement of Poverty' in B. Nolan and T. Callan (eds.), *Poverty and Policy in Ireland [Poverty and Policy]*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994. The authors accept as the standard by which to measure poverty the presence or absence of the resources to 'live with dignity in [one's] society'. p. 11. On this scale between one in six and one in five of Irish households in 1987 were 'experiencing deprivation of a quite basic kind'. 'Key Issues', in *Poverty and Policy* p. 316. On the basis of their ongoing research, the same authors conclude that this situation did not change markedly between 1987 and 1994. See Callan and Nolan, 'Poverty and Policy' in *Social Policy in Ireland: Principles Practice and Problems*, Dublin: Oak Tree Press, 1998, pp. 147-162.

⁹ 'Poverty and Labour Market Measures' in *Poverty and Policy in Ireland*, p. 291.

its *distribution* poses the main challenges.

1.1.2 Developments in Education

Education was a key component of the process of change towards industrialisation in Ireland. The National School system was in place since 1832, a wide network of (voluntary, church-run) secondary schools had developed throughout the nineteenth century and Vocational (technical) schools were founded in 1930. Nevertheless, historian J.J. Lee claims that ‘Lemass was the first Taoiseach to take education seriously’.¹⁰ In the view of his biographer, Brian Farrell, Lemass ‘shared to a considerable extent the practical emphasis on the contribution of education to economic growth implicit in the joint government-OECD sponsored report, *Investment in Education*’.¹¹ The performance of state-sponsored bodies, civil service departments, industry and trade unions depended, in his view, on the quality of their leaders. It is arguable that from the outset, state-supported second level education in Ireland has been instrumentalist in principle and in practice. Until 1966 the Church, primarily through the religious orders, was providing almost all second-level education in Ireland. Participation was not compulsory, and in the main the schools were attended by children of the better-off farming families who were sent to boarding schools, and by the children of professionals, and of middle and lower middle class business families in the towns. Dermot Keogh in his extensive historical research of the period gives the details of participation rates by socio-economic class.¹²

¹⁰ J.J.Lee, ‘Sean Lemass’ in *Ireland 1945-70*, p. 24.

¹¹ Brian Farrell, *Seán Lemass*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1983, p. 112. *Investment in Education* was published in 1965.

¹² For details of participation rates see, for example, Keogh, *Twentieth-Century Ireland: Nation and State [Twentieth-Century Ireland]*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994, pp. 277-278.

The relevance of the schools to the promotion of church ethos and the supply of personnel to priesthood and religious life will arise later in this chapter. The chequered relationship of church and state in relation to the on-going provision of education in Ireland is well documented.¹³ Patronage and management of the National Schools were largely in the hands of Catholic dioceses and exercised through the parish clergy. Such had been the expansion of the church's network of voluntary second-level schools up to the 1960s that when Donogh O'Malley as Minister for Education introduced in 1966 free, compulsory education up to age 15, it was primarily through co-operation with the church authorities and rationalisation and expansion of the existing schools. By 1993 there were 476 Voluntary (438 Catholic, 38 other church) and 322 State Secondary Schools in Ireland.¹⁴ To the present time tensions continue between the Churches and the Department relating to the ownership, management and funding of the Voluntary Schools.

The greatly increased, if uneven, access to second-level education from 1966 onwards has been a major influence in social change in Ireland, giving to some the opportunity for upward social mobility.¹⁵ The changing orientation within that education towards its material outcomes, and the reduced roles of priests and religious in the schools are also significant.¹⁶

Increased participation in education up to the end of second level has led to a corresponding increase in the numbers attending third-level institutions. In 1973 a number of Regional Technical Colleges were founded to meet the increased demand

¹³ See, for example, John Coolahan, *Irish Education: its History and Structure*, Dublin: IPA, 1981 and Louis O'Flaherty, *Management and Control in Irish Education*, Dublin: Drumcondra Teachers' Centre, 1992.

¹⁴ Source: Secretariat of the Council of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools, 1993.

¹⁵ See Sheila Drudy and Kathleen Lynch, *Schools and Society in Ireland*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1993.

¹⁶ There are two reasons for this change. Firstly the falling off in vocations, but also the reassessment of their forms of ministry on the part of Religious Congregations (male and female) traditionally involved in the schools.

and to supplement the academic provision of the Universities through the development of technological training. Gradually these colleges are themselves attaining Institute and University status. However, participation in third-level is notably confined to the middle and upper classes¹⁷ and this fact is highlighted by church activists and sociologists alike. The impact of higher education on religious beliefs and practice is one of the significant findings in the surveys that will be examined in Chapter 3.

1.1.3 The Rise of the Women's Movement

With the economic and educational development of the 1960s it was to be expected that women in particular would reassess critically their situation within Irish society. Historian Margaret Mac Curtain traces the growing consciousness of Irish women of their rights and their contribution to society throughout the nineteenth century, from the suffragette movement into the literary revival in Ireland and the struggle for independence.¹⁸ From the latter part of the 1960s criticisms of sexism and open discrimination against women were made vigorously, through the newspapers and in the media generally.¹⁹ Mary Robinson, constitutional lawyer and later first woman president of Ireland, draws attention to the institutionalising of the domestic role of women in the 1937 Constitution and their 'virtual non-participation ... in the power structures of the State' even up to 1975²⁰. The marriage bar in the teaching

¹⁷ In a 1987 ESRI sample only 3 per cent of those coming from a lower working-class background compared with 39 per cent of those from a professional or managerial one obtained a third-level qualification. C. Whelan, 'Poverty, Social Class, Education, and Intergenerational Mobility', *Poverty and Policy in Ireland*, p. 138.

¹⁸ See 'Women, the Vote and Revolution' in *Women in Irish Society, the Historical Dimension* [*Women in Irish Society*], Dublin: Arlen Press, 1978, pp. 46-56.

¹⁹ See, for example, *The Irish Times*, editorial, 11 June 1968: 'Equal work for unequal pay is the general rule; and in Ireland certainly the idea of women in high places is not yet on. There has never been a woman on the bench or in a decisive position of authority in the government.'

²⁰ *Women in Irish Society*, p.61. Robinson quotes at length an observation made by Mr. Justice Henchy in relation to a challenge by two women to the constitutionality of the jury system, a

profession, in the public service, in local authorities and public health boards and in the banks was seen for what it was ‘an affront to the principles of natural justice’.²¹ Within the trade union movement there was growing concern for the concrete issues relating to women’s pay and conditions generally and of equal pay in particular.²² While the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement was not founded until 1970, it was the result of a heightened awareness which had been growing for at least a decade. Also in 1970 the government-sponsored Commission on the Status of Women was established. As the sixties progressed Irish women became aware of the restricted role which until then they had been expected to play in Irish society. This was inevitable in view of their more equal access to education (even though limited to non-technical areas, by and large),²³ greater possibility of financial independence, increased travel and exposure to women’s attitudes and life-styles elsewhere, and of course a media explosion which will be discussed below. Many issues arising within the women’s movement have had a direct bearing on the response of Irish women to Church teaching and on the part which women had played in maintaining the role of Church in Irish society.

challenge which was in fact upheld by the Supreme Court: “Whatever may have been the position at common law or under statute up to recent times, it is incompatible with the necessary diffusion of rights and duties in a modern democratic society that important public decisions, such as voting, or jury verdicts involving life or liberty, should be made by male citizens only. What is missing in decisions so made is not easy to define; but reason and experience show that such decisions are not calculated to lead to a sense of general acceptability, or to carry an acceptable degree of representativeness, or to have the necessary stamp of responsibility and involvement on the part of the community as a whole. Juries recruited in that way fall short of minimum constitutional standards no less than would juries recruited entirely from female citizens”. p. 64. See also Maurice Manning, ‘Women in Irish National and Local Politics 1922-77’ in *Women in Irish Society*, pp. 92–102.

²¹ D. Keogh, *Twentieth-Century Ireland*, p. 280.

²² See Mary E. Daly, ‘Women, Work and Trade Unionism’ in *Women in Irish Society*, p. 79.

²³ See Eunice McCarthy, ‘Women and Work in Ireland’ in *Women in Irish Society*, p. 105

1.2 A NEW CULTURAL PLURALISM

The second major area of change in Irish society identified at the outset of this chapter was in the mass media and communications, as well as the arts, generally.

1.2.1 The First Irish Television Station

The founding of RTE in 1961 was a major development. On the opening night, de Valera, then President, welcomed the new development 'which, on the one hand, could build up the character of a whole people, but, on the other, could lead, through demoralisation, to decadence and dissolution'.²⁴ Lemass on the other hand stressed 'the central importance of television in opening out Ireland to the world'.²⁵ Whatever the influence of television on Irish society, it was on a huge scale.²⁶ It is not an exaggeration to say that it 'shattered the cosy complacency of traditional Irish attitudes'.²⁷

One of the first challenges to the new RTE authority was the visit of President Kennedy to Ireland, which it covered with efficiency. The visit had enormous impact. Kennedy was well briefed that Ireland was no longer 'insular and parochial'²⁸ and he certainly touched the nerve of a nation ready to believe in itself. 'The heroic deeds that thrill humanity through generations were the deeds of little nations fighting for their freedom' he told the joint session of the Oireachtas.²⁹ Kennedy was welcomed as 'one coming home'³⁰, and he was living proof that the Irish were made of the 'right stuff'.³¹ As a descendant of Irish Catholic emigrants he

²⁴ Keogh, *Twentieth-Century Ireland*, p. 253.

²⁵ *Twentieth-Century Ireland*, p. 253.

²⁶ Between March 1962 and December 1970 the number of television licences held in the country increased by 370 per cent. Cf. J.J. Lee, 'Continuity and Change', p. 172.

²⁷ J.A. Murphy, *Twentieth-Century Ireland*, p. 146.

²⁸ J.A. Murphy, *Twentieth-Century Ireland*, p. 252.

²⁹ *Twentieth-Century Ireland*, p. 252.

³⁰ *The Irish Press*, 26 June 1963, quoted in Keogh, *Twentieth-Century Ireland*, p. 252.

³¹ *The Irish Press*, 29 June 1963, quoted in Keogh, *Twentieth-Century Ireland*, p. 252.

was seen as a symbol of a people rising from the ashes of its past.³²

Among the world affairs which were broadcast directly into the homes of Ireland during the sixties were the violence and civil war in the Congo, (including the sad fate of nine Irish soldiers serving with the UN peacekeeping force), the Cuban missile crisis, the ongoing posturing of the cold war, the evolution of the Common Agricultural Policy in 1963 (the envy of the Irish agricultural industry), the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Vietnam war and the protest movement in the USA, student revolts in Europe and elsewhere, Arab-Israeli conflict, invasion of Czechoslovakia, and US astronauts landing on the moon. No wonder Keogh observes:

RTE news and television current affairs programmes made [world] events more proximate and helped remove a false sense of Ireland's remoteness from the maelstrom of world affairs, which had been a feature of the immediate post-war period.³³

At the end of the 1960s over 50 per cent of RTE television broadcasting still featured imported programmes, and in 1971 nearly 90 per cent of children's programmes came from abroad.³⁴ It is easy then to understand why television acted as 'a major conduit of imported mass cultural influences'.³⁵ Home-produced programmes also had their impact. Social commentators single out productions such as the 'Late, Late Show' for breaking the silence on topics hitherto controlled by the strict norms set down by Church and custom. Diversity of beliefs and practice, the possibility of personal choice in areas such as religion and sexuality were portrayed on that popular chat show.

³² Cf. Murphy, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, p. 147.

³³ Keogh, *Twentieth-Century Ireland*, p. 244.

³⁴ Lee, 'Continuity and Change' p. 173.

³⁵ 'Continuity and Change' p. 173.

1.2.2 Communications and the Arts

Cinema censorship was relaxed at this time, also, and foreign film-makers were being invited into Ireland. Ardmore Film Studios were already opened in 1958. The Kilkenny Design Centre was established in 1963, the National Gallery was renovated, and the new Abbey Theatre was built. Cork Opera House was rebuilt and the Project Arts Centre was set up. Irish authors, such as John B. Keane, Edna O'Brien, Brian Merriman, John McGahern, Brian Friel and others portrayed freely the totality of life in Ireland – the passion for the land, the reality of sexual desire in (hitherto-idealised) women as well as men, the growing pains of adolescence, the motif of escape in emigration. In 1967, Brian Lenihan as Minister for Justice brought in legislation for the unbanning of books after twelve years. The world of music also enjoyed a new vitality during these years. At popular level it was the age of the 'showbands' – playing to packed dance-halls to the delight of the young, who were no longer emigrating in large numbers, and who were progressively gaining more freedom.³⁶ The pioneering work of musicians such as Seán Ó Riada was capturing the new mood of optimism in the country while retaining a traditional idiom.

Historian John Whyte identifies precisely when the media began to publicise all aspects of the activity of the Church.³⁷ At the end of 1963 John Courtney Murray and Gregory Baum, both well-known liberal Catholic theologians were forbidden to lecture in the archdiocese of Dublin. While this was not the first time for such a thing to happen, it was the first time it was reported in the press. Shortly afterwards, articles which attacked the Catholic Church in Ireland published by an Irish

³⁶ In June 1968, Bishop Michael Browne of Galway lifted his ban on Saturday night dancing, allowing the halls in his diocese to open until midnight. He was the last of the Irish bishops to do so. See *The Irish Times*, 3 June 1968

³⁷ John Whyte, 'Church, State and Society, 1950-70' ['Church and State'], *Ireland 1945-70*, p. 77.

journalist, Peter Lennon, in the English *Guardian* were reprinted in the Irish press. Whyte claims that it was from this time onwards that the media in Ireland ‘handled religious affairs with as much freedom as they did secular’.³⁸

The growth of the media dramatically changed family life in Ireland. Watching television became a collective ritual, progressively replacing home-based religious rituals such as recitation of the rosary. The people were exposed to the global world, with its pluriformity of beliefs and lifestyles, its range of living conditions and standards, and its economic interdependence. It is not an exaggeration to say that television changed the nature and scope of social discourse and practice in Ireland.

1.2.3 The Emergence of a Youth Culture

The media explosion and the development in the arts had, inevitably, a major impact on the dynamics of inter-generational relations. In Ireland, as elsewhere, the emergence of a specific ‘youth culture’ can be traced to the 60s, aided by the enhanced purchasing power of young people in a developing economy, educational opportunities beyond those of previous generations, and exposure through travel and media to the cultural pluralism which had grown in post-war Europe as in the USA. The changes in attitudes towards religion in Ireland in recent decades have been analysed closely with respect to age. These changes will be examined in Chapter 3.

1.3 THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN IRISH SOCIETY

The accounts which have been presented so far have indicated the nature and scale of the economic, social and cultural changes which were taking place, in particular in the Republic of Ireland, from the beginning of the 1960s onwards. A question of

³⁸ Whyte, ‘Church and State’, p.77

central importance to this work is: what was the position of the Catholic Church within this society, and how was it changing? In order to appreciate the effect on the Catholic Church in Ireland of these rapid changes it is necessary to review the position of the Church in Ireland immediately prior to that time.

1.3.1 Nineteenth-century Catholicism in Ireland

From the beginning of the nineteenth century the Catholic Church was experiencing a newfound confidence. Since the 1690s the Penal Laws had aimed at disenfranchising Catholics, even though they comprised the majority of the population. Progressive enactments forbade them to own land, to have access to education or to the professions. While there were enticements to Catholics to transfer their religious allegiance to the Protestant faith, it was not considered necessary to extinguish the Catholic religion but rather to exclude Catholics from power in order to maintain the Protestant ascendancy. The Banishment Act of 1697 ordering all Bishops and regular clergy to leave the country was quickly followed by the Registration Act which required every secular priest to register himself, one priest being allowed per parish. In reality, the Penal Laws – except those which related to ownership of land - were enforced only sporadically, at times when England came under threat from Catholic powers. In 1774 denial of the Catholic faith was removed from the Oath of Allegiance. With the gradual repeal of the Laws a Catholic bourgeoisie began to emerge. Catholic families rose to prominence through trade, the granting of Catholic emancipation, and increased access to education. Native religious orders of women and men were founded beginning with Nano Nagle and the Presentation Sisters in Cork, in 1775.³⁹ Under the influence of

³⁹ See T.J. Walsh, *Nano Nagle and the Presentation Sisters*, Monasterevan: Presentation Generalate, 1980.

the Board of Education the National School system became denominational in all but name. Through its growing involvement in education, health and social care the Church gradually attained, throughout the nineteenth century, a pervasive presence and influence in all the major areas of society. The agency of the Catholic Church, as well as the 'established' churches, in the modernisation of Irish society in the nineteenth century is widely acknowledged by historians of the period. The involvement of great numbers of women in this process, principally through membership of the religious orders, is remarkable for the time.

From the early nineteenth century new and impressive churches were built, remarkable for the choice of site, in the height of the spires and in the quality of the buildings, inside and out. Gone were the days of the Mass-rock and the back-street prayer-houses. The Great Famine which ravished the Irish country between 1845 and 1848, transformed the face of Irish society and had very significant impact on the role of the Church in that society. The numbers of priests and religious increased dramatically.⁴⁰ Priest-historian Patrick Corish claims that it was not until this time that the Tridentine programme for religious renewal could be fully implemented in Ireland.⁴¹ In 1849, with the advent from Rome of Cardinal Paul Cullen, a massive re-organisation programme was consolidated. The domestic celebrations of baptisms, weddings and wakes did not reflect the essentially communal nature of the Christian life within the Church, and they often moved too easily from religious rite into abuses such as the over-consumption of alcohol. The Synod of Thurles (1850) decreed that henceforth all baptisms should normally be performed at the Church.

⁴⁰ In 1840 there was one Catholic priest to about 3,500 lay people. In 1960 there was one to every 600. In 1841 there was one religious to about every 7,000 Catholics. A century later there was one to about every 400. J.J. Lee, 'Women and the Church since the Famine', *Women in Irish Society*, p. 40.

⁴¹ Patrick Corish, *The Irish Catholic Experience: a Historical Survey [Irish Catholic Experience]*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan 1985 p. 233.

Celebration of marriages and funeral Masses were likewise gradually moved from the domestic to the communal, formal setting. Sunday evening devotions, Lenten Stations of the Cross, the parish 'mission', the confraternities and sodalities which were promoted, all helped to consolidate a church-building-centred practice of the faith. The 'station Mass'⁴² alone survived in places, and served as a bridge to the revived emphasis in Vatican II on the integration of liturgy and life.⁴³ In Cullen's favour, Lee makes the point that the provision of places of worship and prayer promoted equality among the faithful, a principle to which Cullen was committed:

The emphasis on the physical primacy of the church buildings concentrated the specialised function hitherto diffused as status symbols among the private homes of the more affluent members of the community ...⁴⁴

On the other hand, religious services which are public and formal reflect the *status quo* in terms of the social standing of members of the community.

Emmet Larkin evaluates the significance of the Synod of Thurles for the Irish Church. In his view, Cullen's narrow victory in securing the rejection of the Queen's Colleges (despite the stated opposition of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith) alerted him to the need for a more united hierarchy, and confirmed his determination to 'restructure an Episcopal majority firmly around what he believed to be necessary for the good governance of the Irish Church'.⁴⁵ It was this intention, and Cullen's effective realisation of it in the decade which followed, that earned for him the description, in Larkin's words, 'both by connection and of necessity, the staunchest of all the ultramontanes in the pontificate of Pius IX'.⁴⁶

⁴² The term refers to the celebrations in rotation of Masses in the households of the parish, for clusters of neighbours.

⁴³ Corish, *Irish Catholic Experience*, p. 234.

⁴⁴ Lee, *The modernisation of Irish Society 1848 – 1918 [Modernisation]*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1989, p. 45.

⁴⁵ Emmet Larkin, *The Making of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland 1850-1860*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980, p. 57.

⁴⁶ *The Making of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland 1850-1860*, p. 57.

While there is no doubt that the Irish Catholic Church was in great need of reorganisation after the ravages of the Penal Laws and the Famine, it is arguable that the importation of some narrowly-focused patterns of devotional spirituality from the Continent robbed Ireland of its more native Christianity – especially of ‘the rich religious tradition ... embodied in a language it was losing’.⁴⁷

It is arguable that the introduction into post-famine Ireland of a formal and disciplined practice of religion was not unwelcome in the light of the major rearrangements which were taking place in the structure of society of the day. After the famine the profile of Irish farming classes had been markedly changed. The majority of those who died or emigrated had been labourers and cottiers,⁴⁸ whose numbers were therefore greatly depleted. Tenant farmers gradually emerged as power brokers in society. The stem-family system of land inheritance became the norm, where only two children married locally: the son who inherited the farm and the daughter who married into a neighbouring farm or perhaps into a local business. The resultant decline in the population was continuous from 1841 to 1961.

Lee identifies six factors which influenced demographic change in the post-famine period: changing structure of rural society, rising age at marriage, falling marriage and birth-rates, a static death-rate and emigration.⁴⁹ He is careful to set

⁴⁷ Corish, *Irish Catholic Experience* p. 255 Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh records that by 1851 less than 25 per cent of the population spoke Irish, whereas in 1800 it was the language of about half of the population. *Ireland before the Famine 1798-1848*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1972 p. 157. The incorporation of Christian thought into the culture of the place abounds in the Gaelic language. For example, *Dia dhuit* (*Hello*) translates literally as ‘God to you/God be with you’, and the reply *Dia’s Muire dhuit* says ‘God and Mary to you/with you’. Gaelic prayer invoked blessings on each and every daily activity. An earthed approach to mystery is expressed in a construction such as *le trá is tuile* (*eternally*) which when literally translated means ‘with the ebb and flood of the sea’. Irish-American historian, Samantha Meigs traces the deep inculturation of the Christian message into the social and mental structures of Irish society in *The Reformations in Ireland 1400-1690*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1997.

⁴⁸ The term is used to refer to landless cottage dwellers.

⁴⁹ Lee, *Modernisation*, p. 1.

reduced birth rates in a wider context by noting that most European societies reduced their birth rate in the late nineteenth century.⁵⁰ As a historian Lee assesses the role of the Churches in this development as

... merely reflect[ing] the dominant economic values of post-famine rural society...Priests and parsons, products and prisoners of the same society, dutifully sanctified this mercenary ethos, but they were in any case powerless to challenge the primacy of economic man over the Irish countryside.⁵¹

In his introduction to *Moral Monopoly: the Catholic Church in Modern Irish Society*, first published in 1987, sociologist Tom Inglis offers what he considers to be a new perspective on the part played by the Catholic Church in Irish society. Previous overviews, he claims, have been from liturgical, pastoral or theological perspectives and have come mostly with the approval of the official church. As a sociologist he sees the Church operating as a 'power bloc' in Irish society. In post-famine Ireland, population control was required to further the interests of the farming classes. Delayed marriage, permanent celibacy and emigration were the answer. In reality these meant the denial or the scattering of family, a crude fact which had to be presented in an acceptable light. The Catholic Church, he claims, provided the necessary ideology of family, the moral overlay for the control or repression of sexual activity,⁵² and a glorification of the role of mother as the guardian of the morals not only of her children but also of her husband:

The appropriate 'traditions' were duly manufactured to draw a decorous veil over the ugly face of Irish materialism. Ideologies of illusion provided the bond to reconcile rhetoric with reality by focussing initially on the role of the family, the role of women, and the role of sex. Later they would broaden out into the role of the race and nation.⁵³

⁵⁰ Lee, *Modernisation*, p. 6.

⁵¹ Lee, *Modernisation*, p. 5.

⁵² Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: the Catholic Church in Modern Irish Society [Moral Monopoly]*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987, p. 185.

⁵³ Inglis, *Moral Monopoly*, p. 165.

He also considers a consequence of the place of Church in the society during this period:

[It] was because an adherence to the Catholic Church became the means towards modern civility that the Irish became and remained legalistically religious rather than secularly civil for more than a century ...⁵⁴

Inglis approaches his subject with an assumption that the Church of the late 1980s, as an institution, was interested in recovering and maintaining a position of control, which he claims it took to itself and held on to throughout the hundred years from the Great Famine to the 1960s. His position highlights the need for dialogue between sociology and theology when issues of religion are being analysed. Institutions may by their nature be orientated to self-preservation and power, but the Church is not only an institution.

The picture of an Irish Church being brow-beaten from its integrated folk style to a chapel-centred practice of faith must not be adopted uncritically. Theologian Michael Drumm claims that the horrors of the Great Famine itself transformed the religious mind and heart of the Irish peasantry. It is possible that a solid practice of a directed religion had its attraction for a people who needed to banish the spectre of death and disease and the coffin-ships. Researching the period from a theological perspective, he accepts the role of the Catholic religion in validating the changing patterns of family life:

... the newly emerging Catholic middle class rejected the raucous religious expression of an earlier age in the embrace of personal scrupulosity, individual ambition, and religious rigour.⁵⁵

Moreover, Enlightenment ideas of freedom of enquiry, individual rights, respect for

⁵⁴ *Moral Monopoly*, p. 129.

⁵⁵ 'Irish Catholics – a People formed by Ritual' ['A People formed by Ritual'], *Faith and Culture in the Irish Context*, Eoin Cassidy (ed.), Dublin: Veritas, 1996, p. 94.

science and progress did not impact significantly on a people concerned with survival, land, emigration and fear of the unknown. In this way Drumm challenges the 'conventional wisdom', which would have Irish Catholics 'held in bondage ... by an oppressive church'.⁵⁶ The close identification of Church leaders with the Irish Party and the land question is seen by Larkin as the foundation of a *de facto* Irish State. It is possible that the resulting unity of clergy and people contributed to the Church the consolidation it enjoyed up to the 1960s.⁵⁷

One more outcome of the famine times which should be noted is that it fostered a deep mistrust between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, which is only now gradually succumbing to the ecumenical climate of the 1970s, 80s and 90s. It is true that the desperation of hunger was, in some cases, used as an opening for proselytising by Anglican evangelicals, but this practice was abhorrent to the majority of Irish Anglican pastors.⁵⁸

In summary, then, the nineteenth century was a very significant period in the history of Irish Catholicism. The people were emerging from the Penal Laws, accessing land, education and trade, gaining freedom to vote, to join the professions and to practice their religion openly. They had experienced the devastation of the Famine and its consequences. They were led to and adopted the formal, devotional practices of some elements of the ultramontane European Catholicism of the 1850s. At an institutional level churches, schools, hospitals, and other centres of social involvement were founded. Religious orders flourished - new Irish congregations of women and men as well as those invited from the Continent. The nature of the

⁵⁶ 'A People Formed by Ritual', p. 95.

⁵⁷ Larkin, *The Roman Catholic Church and the Creation of the Modern Irish State 1878 - 1886*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975. Samantha Meigs suggests that the reasons for Ireland's continuing allegiance to Catholicism lie in the centrality of religious structures to the organisation of life in the society from the earliest days of Christianity in Ireland. See footnote 47, p. 19 above.

⁵⁸ 'A People formed by Ritual', p. 87

religious belief and practice developing throughout the nineteenth century and especially from the 1850s onwards is assessed by Corish:

Acceptance of a clear system of belief and a clear round of duty could and did lead to real religious experience, but because on the whole the system was not open and growing, it was by a kind of law of life in some sense necessarily closing and getting more rigid.⁵⁹

Corish claims that with or without Cardinal Cullen this 'Romanising' of the Irish Church would have taken place, in line with what was happening in the rest of Europe.⁶⁰

1.3.2 Continuity of the Catholic Ethos into the Twentieth Century

The consolidation of the Catholic faith in Ireland continued without interruption into the twentieth century. The Catholic church was never an 'established' church in Ireland, yet its influence has been pervasive, not only as the church of the vast majority of the people (93 per cent in 1981), but also as the principal agency within the state, well into the 1960s, in education, health, and social care⁶¹. As early as 1941 Archbishop John Charles McQuaid established the Catholic Social Services Conference to co-ordinate Catholic relief and welfare programmes in Dublin. In 1942 he founded the Catholic Social Welfare Bureau, which provided welfare services to families and an advice centre for emigrants. In fact, he pioneered, with the religious orders, a range of social services which 'dwarfed the efforts of the State authorities', and earned for him from his biographer, John Cooney, the description 'one of the greatest social reformers of independent Ireland'.⁶² The city was expanding rapidly at that time, and McQuaid kept pace in terms of constituting new

⁵⁹ Corish. *Irish Catholic Experience* p. 255.

⁶⁰ *Irish Catholic Experience*, p. 222.

⁶¹ See M. Nic Ghiolla Phadraig, 'Religion and Secularisation' p. 141

⁶² John Cooney, *Irish Times*, 4 April 1998.

parishes, building and renovating churches, schools and hospitals.

While the first Constitution of the State was secular in tone, the Constitution of 1937, – which still obtains today – written by de Valera, and closely watched by Archbishop McQuaid, enshrined the Catholic Church in a ‘special position’ and established the teachings of the Catholic Church in key areas such as divorce, contraception and abortion as the law of the country. Successive referenda/legislation in 1972, 1979, 1985 and 1996 have removed or amended these provisions.

The ‘rites of passage’ are almost exclusively religious ceremonies in Ireland,⁶³ despite the lack of a formal link between church and state. It must, however, be acknowledged that any facile impression of church domination of the affairs of state is mistaken. Whyte documents sixteen occasions, only, out of 1,800 statutes enacted between 1923 and 1970 when members of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Ireland were either consulted or actively involved themselves in shaping government policy.⁶⁴ By far the most notorious of these was the Mother and Child scheme of Dr. Noel Browne, in 1950-51. The Church’s fear that the state would enlarge its power in sensitive areas of family and sexuality was evident, and an indication of how the Catholic Hierarchy interpreted its role as custodian of the morals of the people in these areas.⁶⁵ The extent of the role played in the process by Archbishop McQuaid has become public since the opening of his archives in 1997. Actively engaged in developing the Hierarchy’s position, and enjoying the

⁶³ Civil marriages which in 1971 numbered a mere 170, had increased by 1981 to 454 – still a tiny fraction of the total. See Nic Ghiolla Phadraig, ‘Religion and Secularisation’, p. 141

⁶⁴ Whyte, *Church and State in Modern Ireland, 1923-1970 [Church and State]*, p. 363-4.

⁶⁵ Three comments should be made. The Medical Association also resisted the scheme in question, seeing in it a diminution of the earnings of its members. Secondly, while the controversy led to the dismissal of Dr. Browne, the electorate made its feelings known despite the position taken by their church, and refused to return the government to office in the election which ensued. A detail of this controversy which does not seem to be widely known is this: de Valera’s knowledge that authorities in Rome would not uphold the Irish bishops’ stand on the issue gave him important leverage in his final, successful negotiations on the question. Keogh, *Twentieth-Century Ireland*, p. 220. Mary

confidence of the Taoiseach, John A. Costello, McQuaid was a key figure. Cooney assesses the impact of the controversy. He claims that it highlighted the deference of the Government to the Hierarchy and raised questions about the attitude of the bishops towards the poorer classes. It also disturbed Protestants north and south of the border. Cooney identifies the time as a turning point:

McQuaid may have won the trial of strength against Browne, but in the long run it proved to be a date from which the Catholic Church in Ireland can measure the beginning of its decline. Browne's winning card was that this was no way to run a democracy claiming the name of a republic.⁶⁶

1.3.3 The Catholic Church in Ireland in an Era of Change

The impact of the social change in the 1960s on the Catholic Church and its place in Irish society was not dramatic at first. The rising generation did indicate that change would happen. They voted with their feet, not immediately in terms of Church allegiance, but certainly in their choice of vocation in life. The number of candidates for the priesthood and religious life dropped remarkably from the late sixties onwards.⁶⁷ However, the rapid change took place, as Whyte observes, 'on a platform of stability'.⁶⁸ Hence its consequences were not all, nor immediately, clearly visible. His interpretation of the transformation which took place in the twenty years from 1950 to 1970 is:

At the beginning of the 1950s, Irish Catholicism appeared monolithic and triumphalist; by the end of the 1960s it was self-questioning, more open-minded and divided between different opinions. At the beginning of this period, relations between the denominations at the official level were wary and suspicious; by the end they were cordial, and marked by ecumenism. There was a good cause for saying that, during these twenty years, religion in Ireland changed more quickly

Robinson observes the total absence of women's voice throughout the controversy. 'Women and the New Irish State' p. 61.

⁶⁶ *Irish Times*, 6 April 1998.

⁶⁷ In total, there were 1409 vocations to priesthood and religious life in Ireland in 1966. In 1996 the number was 111. Research and Development Commission, *Irish Priests and Religious 1970-1975*; Research and Development Commission, *Vocations Returns 1996*.

⁶⁸ Whyte, 'Church and State', p. 82

than in any period of similar length since the Reformation.⁶⁹

The near equating of morality with sexual discipline, sometimes to the neglect of justice and social responsibility, which has been characteristic of the Irish Church⁷⁰ is closely related to the role it has taken as the guardian of the status quo. The majority of the boys entering the seminaries at Carlow and Maynooth (both founded in 1790s) were the offspring of the farming, professional and business communities, as were the boys and girls who joined the religious orders in great numbers to work in key areas of education, health and social care.⁷¹ In their formation, they were not encouraged to engage in critical evaluation, but rather were they to see themselves as guardians of the fabric of society through the 'traditional' values of the Catholic Church and of rural, nationalist Ireland. Even those who volunteered for the missionary endeavours of the Church, which were expanding remarkably right up to the 1960s, were in danger of operating from a religious and cultural imperialism of which they were scarcely aware.⁷²

While the position of the Church in Irish society seemed secure, to those willing to see it from a different perspective its vulnerability was becoming evident. Commenting, in 1986, on the findings of her 1976 research, which will be looked at more closely in Chapter 3, Máire Nic Ghiolla Phádraig assesses the situation:

... on the surface, the strength of the institution is very impressive. It is, however, a vulnerable body and one in which a loss of credibility by the bishops on a single important issue could jeopardise the persistence of commitment among a majority of their flock.⁷³

⁶⁹ Whyte, 'Church and State', p. 82

⁷⁰ Writing in 1986 M. Nic Ghiolla Phádraig expresses the view that: 'on matters other than sexuality and family life, there is either indifference or ambivalence regarding church intervention. For instance the pastoral *The Work of Justice* (1977) evoked very little discussion. There is also a tendency to ignore uncomfortable church teachings which is manifestly the case in relation to the use of violence to achieve political independence ...' 'Religion and Secularisation' p. 143.

⁷¹ See. Lee, 'Women and Church since the Famine' in *Women in Irish Society*, p. 40.

⁷² See, for example, Anne McDermott, *Living with Difference – A Presentation Congregation Experience*, Unpublished M. Phil dissertation, Trinity College, Dublin.

⁷³ 'Religion and Secularisation' p. 153.

One needs only to think of the impact of the sexual scandals within the ranks of clergy and religious, which have been coming to light since 1992, – and the manner in which some of them were initially dealt with - to recognise the wisdom of this assessment.⁷⁴ In this instance, a dialogue between sociology and theology could, undoubtedly, have been beneficial to church authorities.

It must be noted here that the outbreak in 1969 of ‘the troubles’ in Northern Ireland, so heavily couched in terms of ‘Protestants’ and ‘Catholics’, raised serious questions at all levels about the real meaning of allegiance to Church. The division of the community of the North along sectarian lines, coinciding so closely with socio- economic classes, brought home to an already more critically-minded people how closely the Irish Catholic identity had become aligned with Irish nationalism.

1.3.4 The Second Vatican Council

It was not only the changing economic, social and cultural environment which was impacting on the Catholic Church in Ireland from the beginning of the 1960s. A major movement for change had also arisen within the Church itself. As Whyte observes:

In the 1960s the Irish Catholic Church stood at the juncture of two tidal waves of change: change in Irish society, and change in the world-wide Catholic Church.⁷⁵

Keogh begins his treatment of change within the Church with the social teaching of Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI. *Mater et Magistra*,⁷⁶ was published in 1961 and emphasised the responsibilities of ownership of private property, and *Populorum*

⁷⁴ The impact of these developments are traced in the surveys of belief and practice which will be studied in Chapter 3.

⁷⁵ Whyte, ‘Church and State’, p. 78.

⁷⁶ AAS 53 (1961), pp. 401-464.

*Progressio*⁷⁷ reinforced and developed the teaching. These documents opened up for consideration the possibilities within social democracy for a redistribution of wealth, and the possibility that state structures could create access for all to essential services. While the right to private property was upheld, absoluteness of that right was challenged. The teaching implied that leaders and policy-makers in Church and the Modern State had much about which to dialogue. The resistance of the Irish Hierarchy to state intervention in social care, as instanced in the Mother and Child controversy, illustrates the situation summarised by Keogh:

It was singularly ironic that a church which had thrown its ideological weight behind the movement to defeat social democracy and the extension of state power in key sectors of the economy up to the end of the 1950s now found it necessary to readjust its position significantly to bring Irish Catholic social teaching into line with papal teaching.⁷⁸

Following the encyclicals, another wave of social engagement began within the Catholic Church in Ireland, such as the founding in 1963 by Bishop Peter Birch of the Social Services Centre in the diocese of Ossory.

When Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council, which took place in Rome between 1962 and 1965, a major movement for change was under way.⁷⁹ The Council, it must be understood, did not arise in a vacuum. The experience of the religious wars and two world wars in Christendom, including the horrors of the Holocaust, had awakened serious questions regarding the true nature of Christianity. The repressive atmosphere of post-reformation Catholicism had made ecclesiological studies unpopular, and Catholic theological scholars had turned their attention to the early Church Fathers. Since the early decades of the century both biblical

⁷⁷ AAS 59 (1967), pp. 257-299.

⁷⁸ Keogh, *Twentieth Century Ireland*, p. 261.

⁷⁹ The Council, and in particular its contribution to the theology of Church as community through its new emphasis on the local Church, and by implication on the parish, will be the subject of Chapters 5 and 6 below.

scholarship and liturgical revision had been gaining ground particularly in Germany and France. All of these movements generated a growing interest in the origins of Christianity, and highlighted the historical conditioning to which the message had been subjected from its beginnings.

At the Vatican Council, theologians who had been previously quietly, or not so quietly, pushing the boundaries of orthodoxy became the *periti* of Commissions examining essentials of church teaching: the nature of the Church itself, the nature of Revelation, how the Liturgy should be celebrated, Ecumenism between the Christian churches, the relationship of Christianity with other religions. The documents of the Council represented new departures in key areas of Church life.

Even though the Irish bishops did not in any way spearhead change during or indeed immediately after Vatican II, Ireland was not excluded from its influence. Gone were the days when Ireland, on the periphery of Europe, was insulated from the influence of trends on the mainland. The access given the international media to developments at the Council as they were happening, was remarkable, and events in Rome were relayed almost as they occurred.⁸⁰ Change was now in the air, within as well as around the Church. In religious periodicals extensive commentaries explored many aspects of change. The new or revived images of church from the scriptures and the Fathers were explored with excitement. Religious Orders held special General Chapters on the directions of the Sacred Congregation, in line with the Council document, *Perfectae caritatis*,⁸¹ to review their life and mission in the Church and the world. The Irish School of Ecumenics was established in 1970.

⁸⁰ See, for example, the coverage given to the Council in the *Guardian* newspaper. There the cut and thrust of liberal and conservative blocs were relayed, especially as they were played out in relation to topics of interest to the public in Britain including Church Unity (George Armstrong, 21 and 30 November 1962), and Council bishops' challenges to the power of the Curia (Editorial, 3 December).

⁸¹ *Documents of Vatican II. [Documents]*, Walter M. Abbott (ed.) Joseph Gallagher (trans.), London /Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966, pp. 466-482.

Structural changes, also, were introduced.⁸² Organisations were formed on social issues (Council for Social Welfare, 1970), media initiatives (Catholic Communications Institute, 1969), the promotion of new understanding and practice of missionary work (Irish Missionary Union, 1969), of Research and Development (CRD 1970) and of third world development (Trócaire, 1973). Everywhere, the issues of justice were faced with a new willingness to be critical and self-critical. Church authorities in Ireland exhibited a new openness on the Constitutional question of the special status of the Catholic Church. (Article 44, which enshrined that status was removed by Referendum in 1972.)

When Pope Paul VI issued, in 1968, the papal encyclical *Humanae vitae*⁸³ reaffirming the Catholic teaching condemning every form of artificial birth control, the response was predictable. A change had been sought and even expected. After the publication, in Ireland as elsewhere questions of authority and conscience were discussed with a new focus at both theological and pastoral levels. The surveys that have traced since that time the disposition of Catholics towards the teaching of their church indicate, as will be seen, a progressive autonomy on their part in relation to what they consider to be matters of private concern. The issue also heightened awareness of the domination of the Catholic Church by a male, celibate hierarchy.

CONCLUSION

The decades since 1960 have been a time of major change in the Catholic Church in Ireland. Economic, social and cultural developments have transformed the lives of Irish people and impacted hugely on the place of religion in their lives. At the same time, the Church has attempted a re-interpretation of itself and its mission. Corish

⁸² Keogh, *Twentieth Century Ireland*, p. 263.

⁸³ AAS 60 (1968), pp. 481-503.

observes that there is no simple reading of what has been happening, and also comments on a surprising lack of readiness for development on the part of Irish Catholicism: ‘passing the changes which [are taking] place under the general name of “Vatican II” is a great simplification of a complex cultural challenge to ... an unexpectedly fragile inheritance’.⁸⁴

Movement in the Catholic Church in Ireland towards a relevant self-understanding and towards a viable interpretation of the relation of church to state, of religion to society and of faith to culture has not been at a uniform pace throughout the later 70s, the 80s and 90s. This may be due, at least in part, to the perceived new conservatism of authorities in Rome, the reluctance of most of those in leadership roles to be critical and self-critical, and the understandable nostalgia of many of the ‘faithful’ for the securities of the past. The challenge which the Catholic Church in Ireland shares with the Church universal is that of understanding itself and its role in the circumstances, culture and idiom of today. As a step to further discussion of this challenge, it is first necessary to establish some theoretical perspectives on the sociology of religion in present-day Irish society. It is to this task that I will turn in the next Chapter.

⁸⁴ Corish, *Irish Catholic Experience*, p. vii

Chapter 2

SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION IN IRISH SOCIETY: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The principal social, cultural and religious transformations which have been taking place within Irish society since the 1960s have been traced in Chapter 1. The present-day context of church in Ireland is the product of these processes. The aim of this chapter is to characterise this context in sociological terms, and to identify its practical implications for the life, mission and ministry of the parish. A pivotal question informing the task may be formulated as follows: Does a specialised, institutional form of a historical religion, in this case Christianity in the Roman Catholic tradition, have the capacity to hold conversation with the religious consciousness of modern (Western, Irish) individuals in their present-day context, and at the same time, because of the centrality of the communal dimension of Christianity, challenge the privatisation of existence which typifies modern living? I will discuss the definition of religion from sociological perspectives, attempt to find a mediating position between intensive and extensive sociologies of religion, and explore the 'secularisation thesis'. I will apply these theoretical perspectives to the contemporary Irish situation, and note some important consequences for the parish. Finally, I will examine Hans-Georg Zieberts' practical theological evaluation of the present situation.

2.1 THE DEFINITION OF RELIGION

While the need for a definition is axiomatic within a field of systematic study such as sociology, from the earliest days of the discipline the question of a sociological definition of religion has been problematic. The spectrum of possibilities ranges from the sharply particularistic to the diffusely generalised. Durkheim's conviction

that institutional religion plays a greatly transformed part in modern societies underpins the widespread assumption that religion, understood in a substantivist sense, and modernity are mutually exclusive. His analysis of the functions of religion, on the other hand, supports its endurance as a category of thought in the study of personal, communal and social experience.

2.1.1 Substantivist Positions

In his study *The Social Reality of Religion* (1969) Peter Berger holds a largely substantivist position. There he presents religion as:

The human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established... By sacred is meant here a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects of experience.¹

Natural or artificial objects, animals, people or objectifications of human culture may be considered sacred, according to Berger, as may particular customs or institutions. Times and places may equally be invested with sacred character. Sacred beings may be 'highly localised spirits [or] great cosmic divinities'.² Thus he associates religion closely with organised forms of expression.

Berger ascribes to the sacred a fundamental function of bringing order to heretofore chaotic reality. This he terms 'nominization'. Further, he ventures to suggest that 'only by way of the sacred was it possible for man to conceive of the cosmos in the first place'.³ He posits an 'inner logic or religious imagination' which transcends culture and gives rise to 'certain uniformities' which can be observed universally, despite varying historical manifestations of the sacred. Thus Berger moves towards an objectivisation, not only of the sacred, but also of institutions and

¹ *The Social Reality of Religion [Social Reality]*, London: Faber, 1969, p. 34.

² *Social Reality*, p. 35.

³ *Social Reality*, p. 37.

roles through which human beings *access* the sacred.

The institutions are thus given a semblance of inevitability, firmness and durability that is analagous to these qualities as ascribed to the gods themselves.⁴

When religion is understood in such a substantivist way it is accorded a significant role in legitimating the social order. Finally, on this view the role of ritual is to represent and therefore to remind human beings of the ‘fundamental reality-definitions and their appropriate legitimations’⁵

The merit of a substantive position, such as that presented above, is the clarity which it offers for the sociological study of religion whether this study be of religion as a theoretical consideration in the understanding of social action, of the relation of religion to other areas of social life, or of religious movements, organisations and roles. However, the difficulties to which substantivist approaches give rise are obvious – chief among them the seeming arbitrariness with which areas of experience are included and excluded, and the danger that variation with the social context will be neglected.

For Bryan Wilson, ‘the explicit and manifest function of religion is to offer [human beings] the prospect of salvation and to provide them with appropriate guidance for its attainment’.⁶ He acknowledges that the concept of salvation has varied from one culture and one religion to another. Wilson distances himself from those (rationalists) who would define religion in terms of its latent functions of social cohesion, social control, explanations of the physical universe, group and individual

⁴ *Social Reality*, p. 45. “For example, the institution of divine kingship, and the several roles representing it, is apprehended as a decisive link between the world of men and the world of the gods. The religious legitimisation of power involved in this institution does not appear as an *ex post facto* justification of a few theoreticians, it is objectively present as the institution is encountered by the man in the street in the course of his everyday life. ... In this manner, the cosmic status of the institution is ‘experienced’ whenever men come into contact with it in the ordinary course of events.”

⁵ *Social Reality*, p. 49.

⁶ *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, p.26.

identity and the expression and regulation of emotion. With Durkheim, he considers that these latent functions are no longer fulfilled exclusively by organised religion in advanced societies.⁷ In Wilson's view migration, increasing moral autonomy, expanding scientific knowledge, pragmatic and instrumentalist value-orientations, and the entertainment and leisure industries have taken over the latent functions of religion.

This situation leaves the 'functionalists', according to Wilson, with no option but to accept as religious the processes in advanced societies which fulfill the latent functions of religion, a position which he finds untenable. He himself takes his stand 'I adopt not a functional, but a substantive definition of religion.'⁸ In doing so he focuses on 'the ultimate commodity which religion purveys'⁹ and names it as 'advice about, and training in, the steps necessary for salvation'.¹⁰ Salvation, he maintains, is 'super-empirical' and therefore 'there is a clear limit to the extent to which rational procedures can be adopted for core religious concerns.'¹¹ It is this characteristic which effectively places religion, in Wilson's view, outside of the domain of technocratic modern society.

The social system functions without religious legitimation; a large proportion of the population seek only very occasional support from religion, and some never do so at all.¹²

Yet, in Wilson's view the many social problems which are everywhere on the increase with large-scale advances in contemporary society

... provide a commentary on the points at which the rational social organisation apparently fails. Indeed, not only does the system fail to cope with these disruptions, it appears that they arise partly as a consequence of its normal operation.¹³

⁷ *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, p. 36.

⁸ *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, p. 42.

⁹ *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, p. 42.

¹⁰ *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, p.45.

¹¹ *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, p. 45.

¹² *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, p.46.

¹³ *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, p.46.

In advanced societies, according to Wilson, persons are reduced to roles and creativity to technical competence, at the expense of substantive values.¹⁴

Ultimate questions, the need for solace, the mutual attraction of the like-minded still point, according to Wilson, to a need for *an equivalent* of religion in modern society – a need which originates with the individual members.

Contemporary society... may yet discover that there are other necessities, the virtues nurtured essentially in local communities, in religious contexts, which in the long run will be shown to be as indispensable to the society of the future as the they were to the communities of the past.¹⁵

Ulrick Beck's thesis that early modernity, through its technical rationality, has heightened the contingency which marks the human experience echoes Wilson's view.¹⁶ However, Beck's analysis of what is needed differs from Wilson's, in that it does not point back to the qualities of localised community living, but forward to a reflexive modernity which takes action in the face of common risk, thereby developing new bases of association, while safeguarding the values of freedom and autonomy:

...individualization is understood here as a historically contradictory *process of societalization*. ...It is precisely the eruption and the growing awareness of these contradictions which can lead to *new socio-cultural commonalities*. On the one hand the new social movements (ecology, peace, feminism) are expressions of the new risk situations in the risk society. On the other, they result from the search for social and personal identities and commitments in detraditionalized culture.¹⁷

2.1.2 Functionalist Approaches

The functionalist approach to religion is justifiably traced to Durkheim, but for present purposes the limits to which Thomas Luckmann has taken Durkheim's logic

¹⁴ *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, p. 51.

¹⁵ *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, p. 52.

¹⁶ *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity [Risk Society]*, London: Sage Publications, 1992.

¹⁷ *Risk Society*, p. 90.

is what will be discussed. Durkheim identified the intellectual and affective roles of religion as primary and drew out its ascetical, normative and integrating roles in a scheme which in itself was comprehensive. Luckmann sees among functionalists two tendencies, corresponding to the cognitive and integrative functions of religion. These are: firstly to define as religious “that which is ‘ultimately’ most significant and important to individuals, groups of individuals, societies”,¹⁸ and secondly to define as religious ‘that common core of values that holds together a culture and helps to maintain the social system’.¹⁹ Taken to their limit these views of religion culminate as

... the most inclusive, ‘functional’ approach [which] defines as religious all processes in which man’s biological nature is transcended, collectively in the construction and maintenance of universes of meaning and, individually, in socialisation.²⁰

Luckmann himself locates religious consciousness *within* the relationship of the individual to the social order; and since ‘human social structures have become historical’²¹ it follows that religious consciousness is historically variable. In particular he observes:

The change from archaic, primitive, traditional and, less radically, from pre-industrial modern times to our contemporary situation in which industrial, bureaucratic and capitalist principles of social organisation ... are dominant, is characterised by the emergence of what may be parsimoniously called privatisation of personal existence. Accompanying this is the privatisation of the sacred cosmos.²²

Luckmann is aware of the difficulty that many sociologists have in acknowledging the presence of religion in modern western industrial societies. He attributes this

¹⁸ ‘Theories of Religion and Social Change’ [‘Religion and Social Change’], *Life-World and Social Realities*, London: Heinemann Educational, 1983, p. 139.

¹⁹ ‘Religion and Social Change’, p. 139.

²⁰ ‘Religion and Social Change’, p. 139.

²¹ ‘The Structural Conditions of Religious Consciousness in Modern Societies’ [‘Structural Conditions’], *Life-world and Social Realities*, p.162.

²² ‘Structural Conditions’, p. 163.

reluctance to ‘a historically and culturally narrow view of what religion is’.²³ He himself invokes the Durkheimian observation that all cultures exhibit a bipolar quality which arises from their distinction between the sacred and the profane – an essential dimension of the general analysis of religion. The question of the relationship of the sacred universe to everyday life, and most importantly to the social order, follows. Luckmann posits the view that in archaic, traditional and pre-industrial societies the sacred universe was supported by the entire social structure, with incidental variations, for example, sexual or generational. Thus personal lives in these societies were governed by ‘sacred norms’ and invested with “some ‘ultimate’ dimension of meaning”.²⁴ In modern societies he observes, by contrast, religious functions (no less than others such as economic and political) tend to be specialised in distinct sets of institutions. This development he sees as part of a comprehensive social change towards functional rationality and bureaucratic organisation. The consequences for individual, personal lives of this social change are, in Luckmann’s view, a high degree of anonymisation, of subjective meaninglessness and of disconnection from social structure and from culture – in a word, the ‘privatisation’ of personal existence.

When religion is perceived as an ‘institutional subsystem’ within society its influence tends to be restricted to private individuals. Moreover religion, in the traditional sense, becomes but one source among others, providing a basis of meaning and norms by which to live. Thus a cultural pluralism arises. It is in the light of the greatly transformed relationship of the individual to the social order in Western industrial modern societies that Luckmann characterises modern religious consciousness. In the first place he observes that this religious consciousness is no

²³ ‘Structural Conditions’, p. 164.

²⁴ ‘Structural Conditions’, p. 165.

longer supported by the social system as a whole. Thus primary socialisation is family- and class-dependent, and is largely separate from secondary socialisation e.g. that effected by the mass media and the market. It is this fragmentation of the socialising influences that leaves the individual with on the one hand, a high degree of *autonomy*, and on the other, a certain *isolation*. The social structure does not model the integration of interests which the development of the individual consciousness requires. In this context the individual is challenged to find or to create a basis for personal relevance within the social order. The resources available to support this personal task are no longer transmitted solely in immediate face-to-face relationships within an established tradition and social setting. Rather does the person encounter them from widely diverse sources through the mass media and the telecommunications systems, in a highly individualised mode. Hence the characteristically modern perception that 'religion is a private matter'. Luckmann holds to the view that the 'bricolage' which results from these structural conditions can still be genuinely religious. Writing in 1978 he envisages the possibility of 'some form of re-socialisation of religion and perhaps a subinstitutional re-socialisation of existence'.²⁵ Moreover he does not rule out the possibility that 'traditional religious bodies ... will insert themselves successfully into this social transformation of religious consciousness in modern societies'.²⁶

I have explored Luckmann's treatment of modern religious consciousness and the privatisation of personal existence at some length to illustrate his functional approach to the definition of religion. His analysis is highly relevant to the questions which this chapter is addressing, namely: Is it possible for Christianity, given its foundations in a community that professed God's self-revelation in history, to

²⁵ 'Structural Conditions', pp. 172-3.

²⁶ 'Structural Conditions', p. 173

express itself in terms and categories which are relevant to the individuals, groups and societies which exist in modern contexts? Are there functions which the Christian religion can fulfil in their regard? Can Christianity both affirm and challenge culture under the particular circumstances of modernity? In the context of this dissertation these questions arise specifically in relation to the life, mission and ministry of the parish.

The functionalist approach is also evident in the work of Robert Bellah. The possible reappropriation of religious faith beyond loss, which Bellah describes, has a strongly hopeful ring.

... 'the faith of loss' point[s] to a situation in which the idols are broken and the gods are dead, but the darkness of negation turns out to be full of rich possibility.²⁷

His populist exposition of individualism and commitment in American society leans heavily on the need for a motivating force which would move individuals and groups beyond the personal and the enclave, to community which embraces difference, and to social and political engagement.²⁸ It will be seen in Part II that early Christian communities were indeed marked by the struggle to 'embrace difference', and that Rahner's theology of the parish as an essential, local manifestation of Church is predicated on its bringing together on the basis of their geographical proximity members who are socially and politically heterogeneous. This theology of parish as church carries with it the imperative of mission in its political and social milieu.

As early as 1963 Bellah was suggesting in the context of his presentation on *Religious Evolution* an interpretation of 'modern religion' as no longer dualistic, but multiplex, 'an infinite possibility thing'.²⁹ He disagrees with the view that modernity

²⁷ *Beyond Belief*, London: Harper and Row, 1976, p. xi..

²⁸ *Habits of the Heart*, London: University of California Press, 1996.

²⁹ *Beyond Belief*, p. 40.

is hostile to religion:

The analysis of modern man as secular, materialistic, dehumanised, and in the deepest sense areligious seems to me fundamentally misguided, for such a judgement is based on standards that cannot adequately gauge the modern temper.³⁰

He illustrates his point with reference to the liberal Protestant tradition in theology, grounded in the 'Kantian breakthrough', but he does not limit his thesis to intellectuals or church-goers:

...the great problem of religion as I have defined it, the symbolisation of man's relation to the ultimate conditions of his existence, is no longer the monopoly of any groups explicitly labelled religious.³¹

While outgrowing the formulations of orthodoxy Bellah claims that human search calls for profounder religious symbolisation than ever before. Nevertheless, in this context he expects:

...traditional religious symbolism to be maintained and developed in new directions, but with growing awareness that it is symbolism and that man in the last analysis is responsible for the choice of his symbolism.³²

Bellah recognises in this process the highly individualised – Luckmann would say privatised – nature of modern religious consciousness. He does not dismiss, any more than Luckmann does, the contribution of specifically religious bodies. While the doctrinal orthodoxy and religiously supported moral precepts traditionally associated with the churches no longer sustain religious action in the world, the role of religious organisation may be to offer favourable environments within which individuals must work out their own ultimate solutions – leading to 'unprecedented opportunities for creative innovation in every sphere of human action'.³³

It is arguable that a functionalist approach reflects the rationalist orientation

³⁰ *Beyond Belief*, p. 40.

³¹ *Beyond Belief*, p. 42.

³² *Beyond Belief*, p. 42.

³³ *Beyond Belief*, p.44.

of modern societies. The stance, however, must be interrogated critically: How might the 'broad-church' approach to the definition of religion define its boundaries and terms of reference in any sociological study of religion in society? And how are modern societies to ensure that valuable elements of their traditions are not lost? A functionalist approach which emphasises the role of religion in supporting social cohesion may neglect a critique of community in terms of justice, and a concentration on human action may limit the understanding of religion, which in the case of Christianity involves belief in the free self-gift to humanity of the transcendent God.

2.1.3 The Irish Context

Luckmann recognises that within relatively stable historical and cultural contexts, the 'common-sense' perceptions of the people at large are reflected in substantive approaches to religion. When a culture is taken for granted, 'small changes in religious institutions or minor transformations in the relation of religion to other social institutions can be adequately explained'.³⁴ There is no doubt that this situation pertained in Ireland up to the 1960s, in view of the centrality of the Roman Catholic religion in Irish society, as outlined in Chapter 1. A significant feature of Catholic socialisation of that time has been observed by Máire Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, namely the lack of emphasis on intellectual development in relation to religion among the vast majority of the people.³⁵ The period of consolidation of the Catholic Church in Ireland – particularly after the famine – was susceptible to the 'Victorian penchant for institutional solutions to social problems'.³⁶ Thus, it was marked by

³⁴ 'Religion and Social Change', p.140.

³⁵ 'Ireland: the Exception that Proves Two Rules' ['Ireland: the Exception'], in Tom Gannon, *World Catholicism in Transition*, New York: Macmillan, 1988, p.207.

³⁶ 'Ireland: the Exception', p. 207

extensive building, and dedication to serving the many needs of the population. The development and application of Catholic thought for the Irish context was largely neglected. Enda McDonagh comments on ‘the lack of intellectual vigour and rigour at the centre of the official church’s debates and decisions’, and considers that this ‘has weakened it in a rapidly-changing society’.³⁷ As far as the masses of the people were concerned, Nic Ghiolla Phádraig observes:

A child-like faith, strict adherence to the sexual code and sacramental duties, together with the rote learning of the catechism, was considered ample equipment to lead a good Catholic life at home or in exile.³⁸

The Catholic bishops supported the foundation of the National University of Ireland only on condition that the Colleges did not include a theology faculty *supported by State funds*.³⁹ The position of the hierarchy was that ‘... monetary provision for a Faculty or for Chairs of Catholic Theology and other formally Catholic branches of teaching should come ... from voluntary Catholic donors alone’.⁴⁰ In Ireland only the clergy had access to third-level theological education until after Vatican II. Moreover, this education did not take place in a university setting, and was thus insulated from interdisciplinary debate. Seminary training was, rather, based on monastic structures and approaches.

The rapidity of change in Ireland over the last four decades, in economic and social life, in the cultural environment and in the church have given rise to a situation of great diversity and pluriformity. Wilson’s observation that ‘... in states that have developed with great rapidity into the contemporary technical epoch ... traditional

³⁷ *Faith in Fragments*, p. 65.

³⁸ ‘Ireland: the Exception’, p. 207.

³⁹ See M. Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, ‘The Power of the Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland’, in *Irish Society: Sociological Perspectives*, P.Clancy, S. Drudy, K. Lynch, L. O’Dowd, (eds.), Dublin: IPA, 1995, p. 606. Nic Ghiolla Phádraig’s assertion of a ‘prohibition’ is somewhat stronger than the historical evidence warrants.

⁴⁰ Donal MacEgan, ‘Our National University for Irish Catholics’, *The Catholic Bulletin*, Vol. 26., Jan-June 1936.

religious dispositions persist' is nevertheless valid, especially in relation to the over-40s.⁴¹ An openness to more functionalist approaches to the definition of religion than were heretofore in evidence is required, if what Wilson regards as the inevitable loss of religion in modern societies is to be avoided in the Irish setting.⁴²

2.1.4 Consequences for the Parish

While the local community and the parish in Ireland were, formerly, largely coterminous, this is no longer the case, and the community and the parish are much more pluralistic – culturally and religiously - than was previously the case. This situation requires of the parish community that it engage in processes of discernment in relation to its self-understanding, and its interpretation of the situation in which it finds itself. An openness to ongoing, informed dialogue, both within parish and between parish and the wider community, is necessary. To make such dialogue possible, relevant and accessible theological education is a pressing need. The implications of this situation for the development in practice of the parish community will be considered in detail in Part III of the dissertation.

2.2 SOCIOLOGIES OF RELIGION

Danièle Hervieu-Léger surveys in some detail the substantivist and functionalist perspectives with a view to finding a generally accepted sociological definition of religion, which is in her view, paramount.⁴³ For purposes of her discussion she identifies as 'intensive' the sociology of religion which takes a substantivist definition of religion as the norm, and as 'extensive' those sociologies which adopt

⁴¹ See surveys, p. 73 below.

⁴² *Contemporary Transformations of Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, p. 116

⁴³ *La Religion pour Memoire*, Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1993, p. 47.

the more functionalist view.

2.2.1 Intensive and Extensive Sociologies of Religion: towards a Mediating Position

Hervieu-Léger posits that the opposition between the different views are more apparent than real, that there is '*une fausse opposition*'.⁴⁴ For instance, she finds within the proponents of substantivist positions, including Berger, much that indicates the social functions of religion.⁴⁵ The Weberian problematic of 'disenchantment' of the world by relocating the task of interpreting history has, in her view, itself opened the possibility that functional approaches to religion may make a significant contribution to the ongoing quest for systems of meaning. She instances in this regard modernity's own '*productions religieuses*'.⁴⁶ At the same time she observes that Durkheim's vision of '*religion de l'homme*' recognises the impossibility of rationalising the demise of (formal) religion⁴⁷ and argues rather for its 'metamorphosis'. Even the secular eschatology of Marxism, she observes, reflects themes which are familiar to traditional religions, e.g. promise before realisation, attention before clarity.⁴⁸

Hervieu-Léger is realistic in her appraisal of modern societies, of the 'scattering' of religion among an assembly of spheres and institutions to the point of invisibility. The merit of this situation is the freedom which is accorded the inherited themes of historical religion to interact with the ideas of free expression, self-realisation and mobility which characterise modern individualism.⁴⁹ She observes,

⁴⁴ *La Religion pour Memoire*, p. 57.

⁴⁵ *La Religion pour Memoire*, p. 53.

⁴⁶ *La Religion pour Memoire*, p. 42.

⁴⁷ *La Religion pour Memoire*, p. 40.

⁴⁸ *La Religion pour Memoire*, p. 37

⁴⁹ *La Religion pour Memoire*, p. 52.

as Luckmann does, a certain movement, a '*glissement*' of the 'great transcendencies' of other-worldly substantivism, towards the minor, more immediate, social and even political transcendencies, and especially towards the 'mini-transcendencies' of individual life, in a way which can confer sacred character on modern culture in itself.⁵⁰

It is this light, Hervieu-Léger suggests that the New Religious Movements may be interpreted as indicative of a much larger process of 'recomposition' of the religious field. Some of these phenomena she sees as possible 'vehicles of an alternative rationality which is as much in harmony as in contrast with modernity'.⁵¹

This view she bases on:

the affinity of the movements with the processes of the privatisation and the individualization of beliefs, which is precisely characteristic of the situation of religion modernity. It is visible in the mobility of religious networks that are founded on an associative basis, as well as in the emphasis that they place on personal experience and the individual's "right to subjectivity".⁵²

Hervieu-Léger acknowledges but is not entirely convinced by the view of New Religious Movements as a 'transitory conjuncture', a reaction to the failure of the 'dream of progress'. For her, this view is redolent of the 'decline of religion in the modern world' hypothesis, which she rejects. (According to Wilson the new Religious Movements are themselves a confirmation of the loss of religion.⁵³)

Ultimately the mediation between intensive and extensive sociologies of religion is found in the more universal domain of the sacred to which they both point. Substantive religion may indeed appeal comprehensively to some, but it does not

⁵⁰ *La Religion pour Memoire*, p. 52'

⁵¹ 'Religion and Modernity in the French Context: For a New Approach to Secularization', ['Religion and Modernity'] *Sociological Analysis*, 51 (1990), S22.

⁵² 'Religion and Modernity', S22.

⁵³ B. Wilson, *Contemporary Transformations of Religion*. Wilson sees the NRMs as avenues through which the needs of society bereft of religion are re-directed. Their rootlessness in any tradition, their tendency to relocate outside of their place of origin and thereby to become largely socially irrelevant,

represent exclusive access to the sacred. Indeed without the challenge of a more functionalist view, it can deteriorate into fundamentalism. Functionalist approaches to religion, likewise, can provide the individual with a system of meaning and norms by which to live. However, the ‘personalised eclecticism’ which often results from the selection of particular elements from several sources may lack internal consistency and integrity.⁵⁴ In terms of Luckmann’s analysis, the consequence of expanding the concept of religion to include a range of experiences and techniques which serve the fulfilment of self or the well-being of the enclave may result in a shrinking of transcendence to the ‘small’ or ‘intermediate’ transcendences of personal and communal living.⁵⁵ Experiences of the ‘great’ transcendence, such as encounter with God as wholly other, or the imperative of justice, or solidarity within the totality of human society, or the concept of truth as *given*, can be effectively screened out.

2.2.2 The Irish Context

The foregoing discussion is very relevant to the contemporary Irish social setting. The early part of Chapter 1 outlined a comparatively recent history in which the sacred universe and the social order (to use Luckmann’s terminology) largely coincided.⁵⁶ In global terms this situation is rare and where it exists, temporary. In Ireland, since the 1960s, rapid economic, social and religious transformations have been taking place that have resulted in greatly-altered relationships between social structures and institutional religion on the one hand and between individuals and

effectively disqualify them from being classed as religions. (See in particular chapter 2 of *Contemporary Transformations*).

⁵⁴ Cf. Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-first Century. Reflections on the Challenges Ahead*, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 107-108.

⁵⁵ ‘Shrinking Transcendence, Expanding Religion?’ in *Sociological Analysis* (50) 1990, p. 135.

⁵⁶ ‘Structural Conditions’, p. 170.

their churches on the other. The surveys of religious beliefs and practice, of attitudes and values which will be examined in Chapter 3 provide evidence of this, even though the fairly sharp and particularistic perspectives and presuppositions represented in the surveys limit the range of data they produce.

In order to characterise the present-day situation in Ireland theoretically there is need for a hermeneutic which recognises diverse views of religion both as a consideration in understanding human action and also as a factor which relates to the structures of society. Christians would then understand themselves and others without recourse to polarising dichotomies. At the same time, all those involved in the on-going dialogue could test the inner consistency of their positions by checking their willingness to be self-critical, and to be concerned, in practice, for social justice.

2.2.4 Consequences for the Parish

The interpretation by the parish of its ministry and mission must consider the realities of the context in which these are to be carried out and fulfilled. An interpretative approach which recognises difference is called for, if the parish is to avoid exclusiveness. A plurality of responses in terms of structures and services is required. Expansion of the personnel involved in the ministry of the parish to include adequately-prepared lay women and men will be put forward in Part III as required, not only by the theology of parish as the church in its time and place, but also by the milieu of the contemporary parish.

2.3. THE SECULARISATION THESIS

Luckmann traces the phases of the relation between social order and religious organisation in western Europe in broad outline, from the centralisation of both political and religious structures after Constantine to the break-up of the Empire and

resultant political ‘retribalisation’ of Europe, which, he observes, gave the church its legitimating role throughout the middle ages.⁵⁷ The fragmentation of the Christian churches following the Reformation and the growing autonomy of nation-states following the Enlightenment and the French Revolution heralded the end of the overarching position of the church in relation to the institutions of the state.

2.3.1 Perspectives on Secularisation

Bryan Wilson defines secularisation as the ‘process by which religious institutions, actions, and consciousness, lose their social significance’.⁵⁸ From a functionalist perspective the same idea is formulated differently as ‘the process that led to increasing autonomy of the various segments of the social structure from norms originating in the sacred cosmos’.⁵⁹ Both definitions apply to the social order and its relation to religion or the sacred cosmos. The ‘secularisation thesis’ reflects the assumed inevitability of this process as a concomitant of growing industrialisation and urbanisation within modern society. Furthermore the thesis implies a corresponding movement away from religion within the individual members of ‘secularised’ society. The basic thesis, and the extrapolation from the social order to the individual need to be contested. Post-war Ireland has been used as an important test-case. As Hornsby-Smith observes the very notions of religion and the sacred are key to the definition of secularisation.

Given an exclusive, substantive definition of church-oriented religion, evidence of institutional decline appears to be a clear indication of secularisation ... On the other hand, when an inclusive, functionalist

⁵⁷ ‘Conditions of Religious Consciousness in Modern Societies’ [‘Religious Consciousness’], *Life-World and Social Realities*, p. 169.

⁵⁸ Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, p. 149

⁵⁹ Luckmann, ‘Secularisation – A Contemporary Myth’ *Life-World and Social Realities*, p. 128.

definition of religion is employed, secularisation seems to be ruled out.⁶⁰

Moreover, a given religious indicator, for example church attendance, may have quite different implications in different social and cultural settings and in different times.⁶¹

Wilson is convinced that secularisation as he understands it is an inevitable consequence of modernisation. As already pointed out, he finds in the New Religious Movements further evidence in support of his position. On the other hand Luckmann considers secularisation to be a myth which has been brought into popular acceptance before it was fully articulated as a theoretical construct.⁶² In support of his rejection of the secularisation thesis he claims that, though ‘...[t]he social structure is secularised ... the myth of secularisation fails to account for the fact that the individual is not secularised’.⁶³

Dobbelaere recognises the complexity of the concept of secularisation.⁶⁴ He distinguishes three dimensions of the process namely: the structural differentiation of societies which he call *laicisation*; changes in *religious involvement* by which he means both changing attitudes and dispositions of members of society towards their religious institutes, and also the new systems of meaning which people adopt for themselves; and *religious change* at organisational level in teaching and practice and the emergence and decline of religious groups. When social change is analysed in terms of these dimensions the possibility of counter-secularising movements is

⁶⁰ ‘Social and Religious Transformation in Ireland: A Case of Secularisation?’, *The Development of Industrial Society in Ireland*, J. Goldthorpe and C. Whelan (eds.), Proceedings of the British Academy, vol. 79, p. 266.

⁶¹ As Nic Ghiolla Phádraig observes in pre-famine Ireland for reasons described in chapter 1 Sunday Mass attendance was as low as 40 per cent, compared with over 90 per cent in the early 1970s. ‘The Power of the Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland’ *Irish Society: Sociological Perspectives*, p.595.

⁶² ‘Secularisation – A Contemporary Myth’, p. 125.

⁶³ ‘Secularisation – A Contemporary Myth’, p. 132

⁶⁴ ‘Secularisation; A Multi-dimensional Concept’, *Current Sociology* 29 (2) Summer 1981, pp. 3-213.

observed. For example, Dobbelaere posits that the traditional churches and denominations (and these alone) ‘emerge as possible challenges to the laicised world’.⁶⁵

In view of the empirically ascertained facts of changing patterns of religious involvement across Europe, Dobbelaere⁶⁶ claims that religion has been ‘individuated’ or privatised. However, in his view, ‘this is not an individual option. It is the particularisation in the religious sphere of a more general structural characteristic of our societies ... the individuation of decisions’.⁶⁷

Ulrick Beck’s proposition of ‘reflective modernity’ leads to a similar interpretation. In *Risk Society* he maintains that the outcome of early or classical modernisation is an individualisation of society – brought about primarily by the processes of industrialisation. Modernity, Beck claims, is now at the point of recognising its own consequences, in terms of the global risks to which industrialisation and its attendant exploitation of natural resources have given rise,⁶⁸

Maureen Junker-Kenny evaluates the proposal that individualization is a ‘more adequate and more precise conceptualization of the transformations in the relations between religion and society than “secularisation”’. The prognosis of the disappearance of religion projected by at least some proponents of the secularisation thesis has already, she observes, been shaken, e.g. by the rise of the New Religious Movements, and also by higher than expected adherence to the Christian churches.⁶⁹ A major strength of the concept of individualization, as a category for interpretation

⁶⁵ ‘Secularisation; A Multi-dimensional Concept’, p. 151.

⁶⁶ ‘Church Involvement and Secularization: Making Sense of the European Case’, *Secularization, Rationalism, and Sectarianism*, E. Barker et al (eds), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, pp. 19-23.

⁶⁷ ‘Church Involvement and Secularization’, p. 23.

⁶⁸ *Risk Society*, p. 31.

⁶⁹ ‘The Individualisation of Faith: Modernization, Church Authority, and the Given Truth of the Gospel [‘Individualisation’]’, *Practical Theology – International Perspectives*, Friedrich Schweitzer and Johannes A. van der Ven (eds.), Berne/Frankfurt/New York, Peter Lang, 1999, p.221.

of the changing relationship between religion and society, is that it acknowledges that this is an on-going process of which the outcome is unfolding. Moreover, the concept is 'also more inclusive because it offers a general theory of society and treats religion as one among other cultural phenomena.' Thus 'the observations made on the changing role of religion can ... also be verified in other cultural realms'.⁷⁰

2.3.2 The Irish Context

In relation to the Irish context, Hornsby-Smith identifies developments which tend to oppose to some degree at least the advance of secularisation along each of the axes in Dobbelaere's analysis. The emergence of church as 'conscience of the nation' with growing social awareness, and the option for mission at the margins, at least by a minority, are examples. One feature of Irish Catholicism noted by Peillon is its heterogeneity.⁷¹ In the present circumstances of rapid change this speaking with multiplicity of voices may be making a significant difference and may result in Ireland's being an exception to the 'rule', and give substance to the views quoted above from both Luckmann and Bellah as well as Dobbelaere that religious organisations, with adaptation, continue to have a role in modern society.

The surveys of religious belief and practice in Ireland which will be scanned in Chapter 3 are evidence of an abiding, if changing, faith dimension in life in Irish society. The thesis that it is *individualisation* of systems of meaning and of ritual expression, rather than secularisation understood as elimination of the dimension of the sacred from life which characterises 'moderns', is borne out in relation to modern Irish society.

⁷⁰ 'Individualization', p. 221-222.

⁷¹ *Contemporary Irish Society: An Introduction*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982, p. 90.

2.3.3 Consequences for the Parish

The equating of religion with belief, and of commitment with church attendance and sacramental participation has to a large extent characterised parish pastoral practice in the Irish context. In this situation, decline in the numbers of those participating in church in this way will be regarded as 'secularisation'. It has been argued that the concept of 'individualisation' is a more adequate and inclusive concept through which religious transformations in modern societies may be understood. With this in mind, the parish's understanding of its missionary role will differ radically from the totalising functions which it carried out in the past. Rather, the parish may see itself uniquely placed at the interface where the primary biographies of its members as individuals and families encounter a shared tradition, and engage with a system which is part of the social milieu.

In Part II the changes which came about through the Second Vatican Council in the Catholic understanding of its relationship to the world will be explored. The autonomy of civil and political systems and institutions is seen, in the perspective of the Council, not as threatening the particular contribution of the Christian message to its society, but rather as a characteristic of its modern context. In the parish, nostalgia for past symbiosis or even control by church needs to be replaced with relationships which at once affirm and challenge the prevailing cultural ethos.

In particular, the parish must learn to engage with the providers of social services on a basis of mutual respect, and to enter partnership with them in the interests of the welfare of all. The variety of services which are offered in the name of the parish itself must respect the variety of life-experiences of parishioners and others. The manifest concerns of all sections of the community must be heard, if the church is to be authentic in modern society. This observation is of particular

relevance to the experience of women.⁷² The style, times and frequency of ritual celebration and the choice of symbolic representations need to become less formalised and much more inclusive. The challenge which such a programme presents will be discussed in practical detail in Part III.

2.4 A PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

Hans-Georg Ziebertz poses as a key question for practical theology in view of the perceived discontinuity between religion and modernity: 'Is the [modern, Western] world really void of religion? If it is not, is it the task of Practical Theology to concern itself with this religion?'⁷³ By examining the crisis as experienced across Europe from the eighteenth century onwards he observes three levels; the factual, the social, and the temporal, on which major changes were taking place. Factually, religious intentions, plans and programmes coming from traditional sources were inadequate and called for modification; socially an array of new forms of religion were posing a challenge to the claims of universal validity of the Christian faith; at the temporal level, change with time was observed with new sharpness in a historical setting which was experienced as hostile. Loss of a sense of continuity between religion and the culture of the age was giving rise to questions and self-criticism. Ziebertz traces historical lines to show how the concept of discontinuity has 'gradually established itself in a vicious circle'.⁷⁴ He outlines the retreat of theology, including practical theology, church (in particular the Roman church) and spirituality behind defences built on claims to truth which were exclusive and universally valid. 'The Roman Church was successful in a comprehensive closing of ranks internally,

⁷² See Chapter 3, p. 81 n 40 for an account of women's experience of the Church.

⁷³ 'Discontinuity and Continuity: A Practical-Theological Reflection on Religion and Modernity', ['Discontinuity and Continuity'], *International Journal of Practical Theology* 2(1), p.1.

⁷⁴ 'Discontinuity and Continuity', p. 3.

while insulating itself against the outside world'.⁷⁵ The consequence was

..cultural petrification, religious separateness, and a growing 'church-ness' of Christianity focussing on the continuing of the church ... [leading to] a loss of contact with the pluralism of the living world.⁷⁶

In the years following World War II, and especially from the 1960s onwards, due to major cultural and political changes (and changes within the Roman church preceding and following Vatican II), European society and even church community were marked by pluralism. Direct conflict arose between the democratic culture and church norms of authority and tradition. There were calls for radical revision of pastoral plans and programmes, an acceptance of pluralism and dialogue, and for change towards participative structures.

Ziebertz suggests that the construct of modernity was offered by sociologists and philosophers to signify a social order which stood over against feudal and medieval structures and thereby against Christian modes of life. He further observes that the term 'secularisation' was adopted as 'a technical term to offer a theoretical explanation of what was happening'.⁷⁷ He sees this concept as fraught with difficulties. On the one hand it could be construed as the logical outcome of Christianity's emphasis on freedom, and hence present Christianity as active in its own demise. On the other hand it could consign religion to a therapeutic role within an otherwise largely autonomous society. Ziebertz refers to Luckmann's functionalism, and to Beck's 'individualisation' as useful counterweights to substantivist historical religion, but cautions against generalisations across formal religion, neo-religious and 'functional equivalents'.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ 'Discontinuity and Continuity', p. 6.

⁷⁶ 'Discontinuity and Continuity', p. 7.

⁷⁷ 'Discontinuity and Continuity', p. 9.

⁷⁸ e.g. procedural competencies, aesthetics etc. Ziebertz' assessment is paralleled in my critique of functionalist views of religion given above, p.43.

Ziebertz judges 'secularisation' and the discontinuity between religion and modernity which it implies as belonging with the 'classifying dichotomies' of the nineteenth century. These serve only to solidify positions, and to judge those who differ. Much more challenging, according to him, is the search for continuities which will be a foundation for on-going critique of church and Christianity, and which will inform pastoral practice within contemporary culture.

The positive aspect of individualisation, over against isolation or atomisation, is the person's scope for choice. Ziebertz refers to the 'risk' of living in this age – and in this regard draws on Beck's analysis of reflexive modernity. He argues, from the basis of choice, with risk, that in reality religion is essential in modern life. The questions he poses for practical theology may be formulated thus: What form of religion is inherent in modernity? How is religion to be articulated in a modern culture? Is it possible for the individual to preserve autonomy and personal freedom while maintaining structural links with formal religious organisation?

As further justification for his call to dialogue and adaptation, Ziebertz observes that Christianity has always engaged in some syncretism.⁷⁹ The challenge to church and to practical theology is to be structurally creative in finding 'communication possibilities where the practical questions of living and the search for meaning will encounter substantial religion'.⁸⁰

2.5 CONCLUSION

The questions which I posed in this chapter concerning the capacity of the Christian religion, and in particular Roman Catholicism, to find points of correlation with modern religious consciousness can now be addressed. By adopting the concept of

⁷⁹ cf. 'Discontinuity and Continuity', p. 16.

⁸⁰ 'Discontinuity and Continuity', p. 18.

individualization rather than secularisation to characterise the transformations associated with rationalization of social systems, it has been shown that there is no necessary discontinuity between religion and modernity. It is even arguable that the emphasis on personal free choice is entirely consonant with the teaching of the gospel. At the same time, I have highlighted the necessity of critique by the church community. Through this critique the privatisation of existence and the consumerist, even if spiritualised, approach to the questions and challenges of life to which the conditions of modernity lead are faced with the reality of the 'great' transcendences of a truth which is given and of the revelation of God's self-giving to humanity in Christ. Thus, while an increasing number of people may choose to compile personal lexicons of belief and ethical codes, there is a definite need for specialised institutions (churches) which relate to them, either personally or through the social media of communication, in this process.

The challenge issued by Ziebertz to the Church, to find the 'communication possibilities' for dialogue between the human search for meaning and substantial religion, which echoes Hervieu-Léger's analysis of the contemporary situation, will be used as a guideline in Part III of the dissertation. There I will discuss strategies for the development in practice of church as community, primarily in the parish, in the present-day, individualised society of Ireland. However, I must first examine the empirical evidence provided by the surveys of religious belief and practice which have been carried out since 1974, and also explore the biblical and theological foundations for the vision of church as community.

Chapter 3

TEN SURVEYS OF RELIGION IN IRELAND, 1974-1998

3.1 THE SURVEYS

In Chapter 1 I referred to a number of surveys of religion in Ireland which have been carried out since 1974. These surveys have been variously motivated by religious, sociological, and media interests. The agencies in question were, respectively: the Irish Bishops' Council for Research and Development (CRD), John Weafer at AGB Adelaide's Religious Research Monitor, and Irish Marketing Surveys commissioned by the CRD; the European Value Systems Study Group (EVSSG) and the Survey and Research Unit (SRU) at the Department of Social Studies, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth; Omnibus Research at Lansdowne Market Research, John Weafer at Irish Marketing Surveys, and the Market Research Bureau of Ireland (MRBI), commissioned by RTE.

In the studies the religious beliefs, practice and attitudes in Ireland are correlated with community type (urban/rural), age, sex, marital status, social class, children in household, and working status of respondents. I will scan the findings and identify the issues and trends which are most significant for this dissertation. I will reflect the findings of the EVSSG in the nine other countries taking part in the European Values Studies in summary at the conclusion of the chapter as they afford comparisons and contrasts with the Irish situation.

3.1.1 Perspectives and Presuppositions of the Surveys

The surveys carried out by CRD in 1974 and 1984 examined the religious beliefs,

practice and moral attitudes of Roman Catholic lay people in Ireland.¹ Micheál Mac Gréil, (SRU) surveyed in 1988/89 the religious practice and attitudes of Irish people as a whole and of Catholics in particular.² John Weafer in 1992 included, with religious beliefs and practice, a section on ‘positive’ experiences within the Catholic Church.³ In the Lansdowne Market Research (1994) and IMS (1995) and the IMS/CRD survey in 1997 the focus was Irish Catholics, and the effect of public scandals involving Church personnel on their practice, beliefs, confidence and general attitudes to Church.⁴ The MRBI/RTE study also focused its attention in 1998 levels of participation (practice) of Catholics in church life, the consequences of the scandals, and their attitudes to Church teaching.⁵

The EVSSG defined ‘value’ for purposes of their research, in 1981 and 1990 as: ‘an underlying disposition contributing to the general explanation of attitudes and behaviour’.⁶ Value domains which emerged as important for Europeans (of all denominations and none) in their personal lives, and which the EVSSG investigated in their work, are (in order of importance) family, friends, work, leisure, religion and politics.

In the interpretation of data from surveys intended to gauge the level of religious belief and practice and the attitudes of members of any church, account must be taken, not only of the perspective of the researcher, but also of his or her presuppositions about the nature, object and sources of that belief, about religious

¹ *Religious Beliefs, Practice and Moral Attitudes, a Comparison of Two Irish Surveys 1974-1984*, Anne Breslin and John Weafer, Council for Research and Development, 1985.

² Mac Gréil, *Religious Practice and Attitudes in Ireland*, Survey and Research Unit, Department of Social Studies, St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth, 1991.

³ John Weafer, ‘A Church in Recession – Three National Surveys, 1974 – 1992’, *The Furrow* 44 (4), p.219.

⁴ *Religious Confidence Survey*, Irish Marketing Surveys for the Council for Research and Development, 1997.

⁵ MRBI, *Attitudes to the Catholic Church*, at MRBI, Temple House, Dublin. Unpublished.

⁶ The European Values Group, *The European Values Study 1981-1990*, p. 3.

practice and indeed about the goals of the church in question.⁷ A danger in religious surveys is the equalising of the core beliefs of the entire Christian tradition e.g. the existence of God, the divinity of Jesus and the Resurrection, with specific doctrines taught by the Catholic Church which must be understood in context e.g. papal infallibility. A close identification of religion with church and sacraments is noticeable, indicating a highly substantive understanding of what religion is.⁸ Alternative understandings of religion are not measured and therefore a theoretical problem arises when the findings are interpreted. Assumptions which are made regarding what is not said may not be accurate, and the too easy equating of decreasing levels of church attendance with 'decline' in religion is faulty.

In the surveys, the church is often, at least implicitly, equated with the clergy and to a lesser extent with members of religious orders e.g. questions concerning 'confidence in the church' in the surveys which were carried out after 1992 and the revelations of scandals involving members of the clergy and religious orders: here 'church' clearly indicated the visible, institutional leadership of church. A remarkable imposition in the survey-designs is the typecasting of lay people in the Church as the passive recipients of the teaching and ministry of the clergy. Finally, survey results inevitably mask variations in interpretation of the questions on the part of respondents.

There can be no easy equating of the findings of largely quantitative research with definitive judgements on the religious commitments of the people involved. Priest-sociologist Liam Ryan is careful to distinguish between faith and what people

⁷ A case in point has already been stressed in Chapter 1: in the closing section of his book, Inglis points out the way forward for the Catholic Church based entirely on the assumption that the goal of the Church is an institutional one, focused on retrieving its former position of power within the state.

⁸ This presupposition is in fact justified in the present case, as will be seen from the findings.

say about their faith.⁹ Similarly in the matter of practice: while participation rates can be measured, distinction must be made between how respondents describe their motives and the actual reasons for their behaviour. Ryan observes that ‘there are seldom “homogeneous” values behind human behaviour but a mesh of struggling inclinations, interests and ideals...’¹⁰ He distinguishes three levels in religious practice namely *the Christian ideal*, towards which all should be striving, *the pragmatic ideology*, or personal value system which he sees as ‘a working compromise between the ideals of the Church and the demands of the world’, and *actual behaviour* which usually reflects the second but is expected to follow the first.

Despite these qualifying observations, the gathering and analysis of data is an essential element in the dialogue between sociology and theology which is required for a practical theology of church as community, and therefore also for the praxis of parish.

3.1.2 Profile of the Population of Ireland in terms of Religious Affiliation

Census figures from the Central Statistics Office (CSO), for 1961, 1971, 1981 and 1991 provide a backdrop for the surveys to be examined. The population of the Republic of Ireland is predominantly Roman Catholic. Non-Catholic Christian denominations, other religions and those describing themselves as having ‘no religion’ comprise only a small minority. While the huge percentage increases in the ‘no religion’ and ‘not stated’ categories are from extremely low bases, a steady increase is evident. The increase in the percentage of population belonging to ‘other stated religion’ is most likely due to the arrival here of people from other religious traditions, as well as a slight move to other religions on the part of former Christians

⁹ Liam Ryan, ‘Faith under Survey’ in *The Furrow*, 34 (1), 1983, p.3.

¹⁰ ‘Faith under Survey’, p.5

Table 3.01: Population of Ireland classified by religion, 1961 – 1991 (CSO)

Religious denomination	1961	1971	1981	1991	1991 as % 1961
	%	%	%	%	%
Catholic	94.85	93.86	93.06	91.56	96.53
Church of Ireland	3.69	3.28	2.77	2.53	68.56
Presbyterian	0.67	.54	.41	.37	55.22
Methodist	0.24	.19	.17	.14	58.33
Jewish	0.12	.09	.06	.04	33.33
Other stated religion	0.19	.21	.31	1.10	578.94
No religion	0.04	.26	1.15	1.88	4,700.00
Not stated	0.20	1.57	2.06	2.36	1,180.00
TOTAL	2,818,341	2,978,248	3,443,405	3,525,719	

3.2 LEVELS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF IN IRELAND

The topics which will be covered in this section are: core beliefs, church membership and allegiance to church teaching.

3.2.1 Acceptance of Core Beliefs

In the 1974 and 1984 surveys (CRD) the extent of religious belief among the Catholic population of Ireland was first examined under the heading of orthodoxy. Key findings are given in Table 3.02.

Table 3.02: Religious belief among Irish Catholic adults 1974-1984 (CRD)

Variables	1974			1984		
	Accept %	Unsure %	Reject %	Accept %	Unsure %	Reject %
Belief in God	95.5	4.1	0.4	92.7	7.0	0.3
Belief in resurrection of Christ	90.8	7.3	1.9	86.2	12.3	1.6
Belief in transubstantiation	88.6	7.9	3.5	82.8	13.7	3.5
Belief in hell	51.3	22.0	26.8	41.4	39.6	19.0

In the ten-year interval, a slow but consistent movement can be observed – from belief to uncertainty (rather than to rejection). Weafer reports that when, following the 1984 survey, the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents were analysed, believers included fewer men than women, fewer young people under 30 years of age, a lower proportion of respondents living in urban areas than in rural areas (under 1,500 population), and fewer people with third-level education than without.¹¹

In the European Values Studies, 1981 and 1990, as already indicated, the EVSSG surveyed the populations of participating countries, regardless of their affiliation to church. Their schemes in relation to religion as a value were quite similar to those used by the Research and Development Unit. The profiles of beliefs of the Irish population as a whole as found by the EVSSG are given in Table 3.03.

Table 3.03: Religious beliefs in Ireland 1981-1990 (EVSSG)

	1981 %	1990 %
<i>Belief</i>		
<i>Belief in God</i>	95	96*
<i>A personal God</i>	73	67*
<i>Life after death</i>	76	78
<i>Hell</i>	55	50

* It is unclear whether these figures relate to total population or to the Catholic population. As reported¹² it would appear to have been processed as a percentage of the Catholic population. The 1981 figures are percentages of the total population.

The outcomes are remarkably similar to those of the CRD researchers. The direction and scale of change between 1981 and 1990 are not uniform across the four areas of

¹¹ 'Change and Continuity in Irish Religion 1974-1984' ['Change and continuity'], *Doctrine and Life* 36 (12), pp.510-512

¹² Whelan and Fahey, 'Religious Change in Ireland' in *Faith and Culture in the Irish Context*, p. 109.

belief. Whelan and Fahey examine the pattern of results by age-group. While the change in the notion of a personal God is most remarkable in the youngest age category in the survey (18-26), there is no evidence that these views alter simply as a consequence of age.¹³ In view of the fact that particular cohorts retain their stance as time proceeds, an interplay between age and the economic, social and cultural factors described in chapter 1 would appear to be the more plausible argument.

In Weafer's study (1992) 96 per cent of Catholics surveyed said they believed in God, 85 per cent believed in heaven, and 45 per cent believed in hell. In this case also Weafer reports that age was the most significant respondent-characteristic. The remaining five surveys did not address directly the question of belief. In summary the data of five surveys between 1974 and 1992 suggests that a very large majority (over 90 per cent) of Irish people had a firm belief in God.

3.2.2 Religious Belief and Membership of Church

The surveys show a clear correlation, in the Irish context, between belief in God and church membership.

Table 3.04: Importance of belief and membership of church (CRD)

	1974	1984
	%	%
<i>Personal need to believe in God</i>	93	91
<i>Membership of church is important</i>	93	89

The figures show a slight movement away from affiliation to faith and/or church in the ten-year interval. The proportion of respondents who said that membership of the church was not important might be considered small (7 per cent in 1974, 11 per cent

¹³ 'Religious Change in Ireland' in *Faith and Culture in the Irish Context*, Eoin Cassidy (ed.),

in 1984) but it is significant to note the upward trend. Neither Mac Gréil nor the IMS addressed this question directly,¹⁴ but in the 1992 survey the figure was 15 per cent and in 1998 18 per cent did not consider religion important.¹⁵ In 1992 those who responded negatively included a higher proportion of younger than older respondents, more Dublin residents than other, and a higher proportion of male than female respondents.¹⁶ According to the 1998 figures young urban and employed respondents were most likely to be among those to whom religion was not important.¹⁷

In summary, then, according to the evidence of four national surveys between 1974 and 1998 the percentage of the Catholic population in Ireland to whom religion was important dropped from 93 per cent to 82 per cent. Young, urban, employed respondents were the least likely to affiliate themselves to church.¹⁸ In the emerging gap between the percentage who believe in God and those who consider religion important we may see the beginnings of a contemporary tendency to seek a 'spirituality' for living, as opposed to a 'religion' to be observed or a church to be joined. In terms of the definition of religion discussed in chapter 2, there is evidence here for the statement that a functionalist view may be gradually replacing the substantivist ideas of religion which have been prevalent in Irish society.

Dublin: Veritas, 1996, p.109.

¹⁴ Mac Gréil did assess his respondents' view of the influence of the religious belief in which they were reared. He found that 83 per cent had a positive perception of the its contribution, while just 1.8 per cent had a negative perception of the effects of religion on their upbringing. Analysed in more detail, older respondents, females and those with primary education only, were more likely to consider the influence of religion essential.

¹⁵ Significant data follows: respondents whose evaluation of the importance of religion was below the average of 82 per cent were respondents aged 18-24, (65 per cent), those aged 25-34 (73 per cent), employed (76 per cent) and urban dwellers (79 per cent). Those groups whose response was above average were rural respondents (86 per cent) and unemployed (88 per cent).

¹⁶ Weafer, 'A Church in Recession', p.223.

¹⁷ Later it will be observed that figures for males and females become more even as women attain greater equality in socio-economic status. (page 76 below)

¹⁸ The lowest recorded figure on this question was 65 per cent, the response of the 18-24 cohort in 1998.

Weafer (1992) gave respondents an opening to name their positive experiences of church membership, and 56 per cent responded favourably. Their comments were fairly wide-ranging, from a reason for being (22 per cent) through community/togetherness (12 per cent) to 'something' (1 per cent).

3.2.3 Religious Belief and Agreement with Church Teaching

The CRD findings indicate an increase from 32 per cent to 37 per cent in those who have some difficulty with church teaching, between 1974 and 1984. Weafer also notes that people in managerial/professional classes were less inclined than semi-skilled or unskilled workers or their farming counterparts to accept some aspect of church teaching.¹⁹ The Weafer (1992) result for the same question was 35 per cent. Weafer draws attention to the changing patterns in the socio-economic characteristics of those who expressed difficulty.²⁰ Between 1974 and 1992, there was a reduction in the difference between men and women. In addition, the largest portion (42 per cent) of the 1992 respondents who expressed difficulty were in the middle-aged bracket – suggesting that on this issue people's dispositions were not changing as they got older. He also noted a more marked polarisation between social classes on this count – with 51 per cent of professional/managerial classes reporting some difficulty with church teaching.

The surveys of 1994, 1995, 1997 and 1998 addressed the impact of scandals involving members of the clergy and religious orders on Catholics' confidence in and respect for the 'church' and on their personal beliefs. In 1994, 42 per cent reported less respect for the Catholic Church, while 17 per cent said they had lost at least

¹⁹ Weafer, 'Change and Continuity', p.511.

²⁰ 'A Church in Recession', p.222.

some measure of personal faith.²¹ In 1995 the view that the church had been permanently damaged was held by 57 per cent. (Of those aged under 34, 75 per cent were of this opinion.)²² In the 1998 study, 91 per cent of (Catholic) respondents were of the opinion that the sexual scandals in the Church that have become public since 1992 have had a damaging effect on it and this view was held consistently across all categories. However, in the IMS/CRD survey of 1997, 72 per cent of respondents said that their religious beliefs and practices had not been affected by the scandals.²³ It can be concluded from these findings that between 1994 and 1998 an increasing number of Catholics were losing respect for their ‘church’, or considering it to be seriously damaged by the scandals, they were not losing personal faith.

In the MRBI (1998) survey, four areas were selected to gauge (Catholic) respondents’ level of familiarity and agreement with the attitude of their church, namely contraception, divorce, priestly celibacy and women priests. The results are shown in Table 3.05.

Table 3.05: Familiarity and level of agreement with certain attitudes of the Catholic Church 1998 (MRBI)

	<i>Familiar with the Church’s position</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Contraception</i>	86	22	70
<i>Divorce</i>	89	33	58
<i>Priestly Celibacy</i>	86	25	67
<i>Women Priests</i>	83	28	61

Some significant details emerge from the analysis of these results. Older respondents

²¹ ref (CRD)

²² See M. Corish, ‘Aspects of the Secularisation of Irish Society 1958-1996’, *Faith and Culture in the Irish Context*. E. Cassidy (ed.), p.166.

²³ *Religious Confidence Survey*, p.10. ‘Further investigation of the 24 per cent who claimed their religious belief and practice were affected by the scandals suggests that they are people whose loyalty

(50 years and over), those from rural areas, and from the lowest social class F, were consistently more likely to agree with the Church's attitudes on the selected topics than respondents in other categories. (MRBI did not apply the category of educational level in their research.) As regards age, it was the respondents in the 25-34 bracket who were highest above the average level of disagreement. A more conservative position on the part of the 18 –24 year old group must be considered in the light of the response from this group, given above at 65 per cent, to the importance of religion in their lives. It is possible that there was a tendency here to hold somewhat rigid standards for allegiance to church, but standards which, to some extent, are for other people to uphold.

It emerges that between 1992 and 1998 there was a very significant change in overall attitude to church teaching on contraception, divorce, priestly celibacy and women priests. Weafer's report (1992) give figures of 28, 19, 3 and 6 per cent respectively of respondents who disagree with the church's position on these issues.

3.3 LEVELS OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE IN IRELAND, 1974 – 1998

The area which is covered by all ten surveys is religious practice. I will treat it, in the manner of the surveys, under the headings of Church attendance and practice of prayer.

3.3.1 Attendance at and Participation in Church Liturgies.

In the RDU surveys the variables measured with regard to church liturgies were Mass attendance, Communion reception, and frequency of attendance at Confession. Key results are given in Table 3.06.

to the Catholic Church is perhaps more tenuous than many of their counterparts [while] in socio-demographic terms, little or no variation emerged...'

Table 3.06: Religious practice, 1974-1984 (RDU)

	1974	1984
	%	%
<i>Mass attendance</i>		
<i>at least once a week</i>	90.9	86.9
<i>sometimes</i>	6.4	10.2
<i>never</i>	2.6	2.9
<i>Communion reception</i>		
<i>at least weekly</i>	28.0	38.4
<i>sometimes</i>	69.0	57.2
<i>never</i>	3.0	4.4
<i>Confession attendance</i>		
<i>at least monthly</i>	46.5	26.1
<i>sometimes</i>	49.7	66.9
<i>never</i>	3.7	7.1

In the ten-year interval, there is not a uniform, remarkable change in the figures overall. Against that background the change in attendance at Confession is indeed significant, and arguably the clearest indicator in this part of the surveys of difficulty with the Church's teaching, reported earlier, on the part of approximately one third of the respondents.

The characteristics of respondents who take part in Mass at least once a week (in 1984), when analysed, show a higher proportion of women than men, more from older age-groups, more married respondents than single, more rural dwellers than urban (proportionately) and a higher proportion of the farming sector than in any other socio-economic category. The studies try to assess the reasons for Mass attendance. Of those who attend, 66 per cent of respondents in 1984 stated reasons related to 'duty', while 30 percent cited personal reasons such as 'feeling better', 'habit', seeking forgiveness and avoiding guilt. What is noteworthy is that the need for Christians to assemble together did not feature anywhere. It is not listed in the

researcher's scheme, and whether or not this scheme was proffered as a prompt card is not clear. In either case, community did not arise among the respondents' reasons for being present at Mass. Apart from illness, the reasons for non-attendance (on weekly basis, taking that as the norm) were indifference (60 per cent of cases) and resentment or disaffiliation (18 per cent).

It is important to notice the increase, 10 per cent, in this interval, in the percentage of respondents receiving Communion 'at least weekly'. The characteristics of those who receive Communion most frequently follow closely those given above in relation to Mass attendance. Mention was made of a higher proportion in managerial and professional than in skilled categories. Attention has been drawn already to the significant drop in attendance at Confession, a change evident throughout the surveys. When the characteristics of those still attending Confession 'at least monthly' were analysed it was found that the category contained a higher proportion of women, of the oldest age group, of farmers and of unskilled manual workers, of those with primary education only, and of rural dwellers. Correlation between religious affiliation and level of educational attainment is very important, and will be discussed below.

In the EVSSG surveys, 1981 and 1990, overall patterns emerge in relation to Mass attendance by Catholics, and practice of prayer by respondents, which are similar to the results found by the CRD researchers.

Table 3.07: Religious Practice 1981-1990 (EVSSG)

	1981	1990
	%	%
<i>Mass attendance (Catholics)</i>		
<i>At least weekly</i>	87	85
<i>Monthly</i>	5	7
<i>Less than monthly</i>	8	9

Hornsby-Smith and Whelan analyse in detail the breakdown of the figures given above into categories of age, sex, location (urban or rural), level of education and social class.²⁴ While the differences between the figures for 1981 and 1990 are ‘relatively modest’ it will be seen that the overall figures do ‘conceal more substantial variations among particular groups.’²⁵ The most significant influences were found in combinations of these characteristics, as will be seen. An important distinction will also be noticed between the impact of overall changes in the cultural climate, and age-related differences in the practices of the young which show every likelihood of being carried forward, in time, through the ‘cohort effect’.

When each survey was examined in detail, at any given point in time older people are more likely to attend church. Between the two surveys there is a decline in attendance by each age group except the 71+ age-group. However, when particular cohorts are traced longitudinally between 1981 and 1990 it is found that church attendance had dropped in the case of those aged 18-26 and those aged 45-53 in 1981, but it had increased in all other age-ranges. Hornsby-Smith and Whelan suggest that the first group may be influenced by increased domestic responsibility and that the second group may have been the hardest hit by the increased

²⁴ ‘Religious and Moral Values’ in *Values and Social Change in Ireland*, pp.20-29.

²⁵ Hornsby –Smith and Whelan, ‘Religious and Moral Values’ p.22.

unemployment of the decade.²⁶ The withdrawal from communal expression of faith by people who are economically and socially marginalised is interpreted by Hornsby-Smith and Whelan as indicating a lack of self-appreciation, and a reduction of affiliation to the mainstream of community and society.²⁷ It is, however, the trend among the youngest cohort (18-26) which, in their view 'gives some cause for concern'.²⁸

The effect of age on levels of church attendance varies significantly with other characteristics, notably social class and highest level of education. In 1990, among the over-40s, 94 per cent of 'non-manual' classes and 84 per cent of 'manual' classes said they attended church at least weekly. At the same time among the under-40s, 64 per cent of the 'non-manual' classes and 78 per cent of the 'manual' classes attended at least weekly. A similar pattern emerges when age and education are taken together. An effect of higher education levels is much more noticeable in the under-40s – in 1990 the proportion of those under 40 who had received third-level education and who attended church weekly was 57 per cent. It must be remembered that those under 40 in 1990 were born since 1950 and were the young generation in Ireland of the 1960s and later. These findings suggest that economic, social and cultural environment is a strong factor in determining church attendance and that, for those born since 1950 religious affiliation tends to drop with rising level of educational attainment.

The variation in frequency of church attendance with sex of respondent seemed, following the analysis, to be influenced by location and employment status. In general, women were found to be more likely attenders than men. However, in

²⁶ 'Religious and Moral Values' p. 22.

²⁷ 'Religious and Moral Values', p. 24-27.

²⁸ 'Religious and Moral Values', p. 23.

1990 the figures for rural men (87 per cent) approximate to those of rural women (91 per cent) and the figures for women in full-time employment (78 per cent) approximate to those of their male counterparts (75 per cent). Figures at the same time for unemployed men and women are 52 per cent and 61 per cent, respectively.²⁹ These are important findings which reinforce the view of socio-economic circumstances as having a major impact on church attendance.

The SRU survey in 1988/89 coincided closely in time with the second EVSSG research. It is interesting, therefore to compare and contrast the findings reported by Mac Gréil with those of the EVSSG:

Table 3.08: Frequency of Mass attendance, Communion and Confession 1988/89 (SRU)

	<i>Mass</i> %	<i>Communion</i> %	<i>Confession</i> %
<i>At least weekly</i>	82	43	2
<i>Sometimes</i>	12	37	52
<i>Rarely/never</i>	6	20	46

Mac Gréil correlates the figures for Mass attendance with age, area of rearing and place of residence, and observes that in 1988/89 the attendance by 21-35 age group was lowest, at 11 percentage points below average. Otherwise the pattern of the RDU and EVSSG results obtain i.e. attendance increases with age cohort, when the results are studied vertically. Area of rearing and place of residence indicate the negative effect of urbanisation on formal religious practice, though he observes that attendance is proportionately lower in Dublin than in other urbanised centres. As regards reception of Communion, the patterns of response by age, area of rearing and place of residence correspond largely to those of Mass attendance. There was a

²⁹ 'Religious and Moral Values' p. 24.

notable disparity between the frequencies of reception (weekly or more often) by men (28 per cent) and women (55 per cent). Also, a higher proportion of those in the higher levels of education, and 'top occupation' emerged as more frequent receivers of Communion. While levels of attendance at church decreases with higher levels of educational attainment, it would seem that for those who do attend, there is a higher rate of participation.

Variation in frequency of attendance at Confession with age, gender and place of residence corresponded to those for reception of Communion, with the notable exception of variation with education. Respondents with primary education only reported the highest frequency and those with third level education reported the lowest frequency of regular or occasional attendance at Confession.

Mac Gréil discusses the connection between frequency of participation and level of attachment to the Church. 'Before concluding from ... the findings on participation as indicative of the level of Church membership, it may be necessary to discover the degree to which certain sections of the Roman Catholic population accept fully the prescribed norms of participation.'³⁰

In 1992 John Weafer found the percentage of respondents who attended Mass at least weekly had dropped to 78 per cent. The percentage of those who said they never attend had not increased significantly, however, remaining at 3 per cent. Weafer observes that the increase in the 'more than once a week' category (not recorded above) between 1974 and 1984 had been reversed by 1992.³¹ The socio-economic characteristics of respondents in each category, and the reasons given by

³⁰ *Religious Practice and Attitudes in Ireland*, p.10. This observation is important. A case in point is how the quiet resolution of issues of artificial contraception following the publication of *Humanae Vitae* led inevitably to an increasing autonomy in relation to church precepts on the part of at least some church members.

³¹ 'Religious and Moral Values', p. 22.

respondents for occasional or non-attendance, in 1992, approximated very closely to those of the earlier surveys.

The IMS/CRD survey in 1997 found that ‘Mass attendance for Catholics (18+ years) has declined significantly ... from a high of 91 per cent in 1974 to its current level of 65 per cent’³² Age, and, to a lesser extent residence, were found to be the most significant factors.³³ While attendance at monthly Confession were found to have dropped to 9 per cent, 42 per cent of respondents said they received Holy Communion at least weekly and 56 per cent at least monthly.³⁴ Socio-demographic characteristics of those attending Confession and Holy Communion are not given in the report.

The results from 1994, 1995, and 1998 represent a continuation of the downward trend in the frequency of religious practice among Catholics. The findings on Mass attendance are summarised in Table 3.09.

Table 3.09: Frequency of Mass Attendance 1994, 1995, 1998

	1994	1995	1998
	%	%	%
<i>At least weekly</i>	77	64	60
<i>At least monthly</i>	7	11	11
<i>Occasionally</i>	11	17	11
<i>Rarely/never</i>	5	8	18

There is significant detail contained in the results of the MRBI research. Results are given in Tables 3.10, 3.11, 3.12 (overleaf) The variation of attendance-rate with category of respondent is so remarkable in the summaries below that it seems almost

³² *Religious Confidence Survey*, p.(iii).

³³ ‘31 percent of 25-34 year old male, urban residents attend mass once a week or more often, compared with 37 per cent of 25-34 year old female, urban residents, 39 per cent of 15-24 year old male, urban residents and 32 per cent of 15-25 year old female, urban residents.’ *Religious Confidence Survey*, p.(iii).

³⁴ *Religious Confidence Survey*, p. 8.

meaningless to quote the average figures as an indication of levels of practice within the Irish Catholic population. More detailed correlation (such as has been done with the EVSSG figures) would be warranted, but the raw data are not accessible.

Table 3.10: Frequency of Mass Attendance by community type and age 1998 (MRBI)

	<i>Urban</i>	<i>Rural</i>	<i>18-24</i>	<i>25-34</i>	<i>35-49</i>	<i>50-64</i>	<i>65+</i>
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<i>At least weekly</i>	48	77	38	39	60	83	87
<i>At least monthly</i>	13	7	14	15	13	4	5
<i>Occasionally</i>	13	7	18	17	10	7	2
<i>Rarely/never</i>	25	8	31	29	17	6	5

The higher rate of attendance in rural area is a feature of the surveys from 1974 onwards, and continues up to this one in 1998. Whelan and Fahey suggest, even in 1996, that in rural areas ‘there is more likely to be stronger community support as well as strong expectations of church attendance than in urban areas’.³⁵ While variation with age is as would be expected from age 34 upwards, the very slight variation between the two youngest age groups is noticeable. This survey is too recent to be used as an indicator of a levelling off in the trend towards reduced church attendance.

In the next table (overleaf) the significant gap between men and women in the results does not necessarily invalidate the observation that as women approach equality as women approach equality with men in socio-economic status their participation rates would approximate to the average.³⁶

³⁵ ‘Religious Change in Ireland 1981-1990’, p.103.

³⁶ See above p. 76 above.

Table 3.11: Frequency of Mass Attendance by sex, marital status and children in household 1998 (MRBI)

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Married</i> <i>Wid/sep</i> <i>Co-hab</i>	<i>Single</i>	<i>With</i> <i>children</i>	<i>Without</i> <i>children</i>
	%	%	%	%	%	%
<i>At least weekly</i>	55	65	66	45	51	67
<i>At least monthly</i>	13	9	11	11	14	9
<i>Occasionally</i>	10	12	10	13	14	9
<i>Rarely/never</i>	22	14	13	31	21	16

If this fact of women's approximation to the average with increasing socio-economic equality (which was established above) is taken into account, the difference between results for men and women in this survey may be interpreted as indicating a wide representation from the full socio-economic spectrum.

Table 3.12: Frequency of Mass Attendance by class and working status 1998 (MRBI)

	<i>Class</i> <i>ABC1</i>	<i>Class</i> <i>C2DE</i>	<i>Class</i> <i>F</i>	<i>In</i> <i>employment</i>	<i>Not in</i> <i>employment</i>
	%	%	%	%	%
<i>At least weekly</i>	59	53	87	54	66
<i>At least monthly</i>	13	11	5	13	8
<i>Occasionally</i>	9	15	3	12	10
<i>Rarely/never</i>	20	20	5	22	15

Other documented sources would suggest that the MRBI sample did not reflect the reality of church attendance in areas of concentrated high unemployment and social deprivation.³⁷

³⁷ RTE *Would You Believe* documentary on 11 January 1998 in communities of concentrated high unemployment and social deprivation suggest participation levels of 8-10 per cent. Also the *Prime*

3.3.2 The Practice of Prayer

In the CRD surveys of 1974 and 1984, respectively, 80 and 85 per cent of respondents said they prayed daily, and 49 and 56 per cent said they prayed in family. The increase is noteworthy. It is interesting to observe that the socio-economic characteristics of those who pray often follow closely those of the frequent Mass-goers. In the EVSSG surveys, 1981 and 90, the figures for those 'drawing comfort and strength from prayer' are of the same order and also show a slight increase, from 80 to 82 per cent.

The SRU survey also asked about the frequency of personal prayer. Results are given in Table 9. Once again, these figures cover a wide variation across a variety of categories of respondent.

Table 3.13: Frequency of personal prayer of Roman Catholics 1988/89 (SRU)

	%
<i>Once a day or more often</i>	72
<i>Once a week or more often</i>	91
<i>Less than once a week</i>	9

Reported frequencies e.g. for 'once a week or more often' increase with age cohort from 89 per cent to 97 per cent (excepting a slight dip to 86 per cent by 21-35 age group). 94 per cent of females and 87 per cent of males report positively to some level of prayer. Those widowed emerge at top of the list at 98 per cent. The results vary with area of rearing from 82 per cent of those raised in a large city to 95 per cent of those raised in the country. Finally, the reported frequencies drop from 96 per cent of those with primary education to 86 per cent of those with third-level

Time programme itself on 3 February 1998, on which the MRBI survey was featured, identified an area of high unemployment to illustrate a new 'missionary' form of parish ministry, and in that area gave the figure for Mass attendance as 7 per cent.

education. In the 'once a day or more often' category of response, only those aged 18-20, 21-35, and those with third-level education reported at under 60 per cent. Their frequencies were 48 per cent, 59 per cent and 56 per cent respectively. These figures suggest, yet again, a close connection between the range of interests and options available and the place of religion and religious practice in the lives of people. Socio-cultural circumstances emerge again as a major factor in determining levels of practice of religion.

While, as Mac Gréil observes 'the practice of prayer on a regular basis must indicate a strong degree of belief',³⁸ the tendencies among the young and the more highly-educated away from patterns of regular prayer should be noted. In a development of this section of the survey it is found that 86 per cent of the population said they felt 'extremely close' or 'somewhat close' to God, most of the time. Mac Gréil argues that this finding bears out 'the strong religious ethos of the population'.³⁹

The argument in favour of the concept of *individualisation* rather than *secularisation* as marking of the modern social context is supported by these empirical findings. It is paralleled by the emphasis which many today place on a spirituality for living, while contrasting it with a religion to be observed. The implication of an opposition between these two realities is itself a commentary on the religion which they have experienced in their church. The voice of those who are looking for alternatives is one to be listened to by the church, if it is to retain its foothold in the social networks in which the people are engaged. In particular the rise in interest in meditation, in self-development, in exploring the potentialities of personhood and community through fellowships of shared experience are a manifest

³⁸ *Religious Practice and Attitudes*, p. 35.

³⁹ *Religious Practice and Attitudes*, p. 38.

concern of the present-day Western culture. The resources of the Christian tradition are available to the Church, in particular in its parish setting, to be offered in a variety of formats to those who are seeking for the enrichment of a spirituality which relates to the experiences of life.

The experience of women in particular has not been reflected, nor even always respected in the patriarchal ethos of the Roman Catholic Church. Expansion of the metaphors within which the Christian message is expressed and taught, beginning with a recognition of the feminine as equally a reflection of God, will be essential if women are to continue to identify, in significant numbers, with the tradition. A recognition, not only in theology but also in practice and in structures of the equal contribution and role of women in the life and mission of the church is an essential development, if the alienation of women which is reported by Marguerite Corish is to be stemmed.⁴⁰ Whelan and Fahey observe the centrality of women to the fabric of church and society by reference to the changing patterns of female religious vocations:

The collapse in female religious vocations in recent decades, not only in Ireland but in many parts of the Catholic world, has been far more extreme than the corresponding decline among male vocations and may be one indication of how new thinking about women's roles has helped create a uniform outcome in religious behaviour across quite diverse societies in the west.⁴¹

⁴⁰ *Women in the Church in Ireland*, Dublin: Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, 1993. 'Over two-third of respondents in a survey of women who considered themselves committed Catholics felt a sense of anger at the way women are treated in the Church. A total of 57 per cent felt hurt by the Church – either by the form of liturgy, by what the Church says or by the interpretation of scripture.' Aspects of secularisation in Irish Society 1958-1996, p.151.

⁴¹ Religious Change in Ireland 1981-1990, p.114. For a detailed study of changing patterns of womens' religious vocations internationally, see the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1996.

3.4 THE WESTERN EUROPEAN CONTEXT IN 1990

The changing patterns of religious belief, practice and attitudes of Irish people that have been scanned, have taken place in an Ireland that is progressively more part of, in communication with and under the influence of the same economic and cultural forces as mainland Europe. Hence, these changing patterns need to be viewed in the context of what has been happening to religious belief in Western Europe during the same time.

3.4.1 Religious Belief

Ashford and Timms present the significant findings of the EVSSG surveys of 1981 and 1990, involving representative samples of the populations of Great Britain, Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland, West Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, France, Italy, Spain and Portugal. They preface their analysis of the findings of the EVSSG study which relate to church with the observation that

[t]he long and involved story of Europe would be unintelligible without some reference to religion, and to religious ways of being in, and understanding, the present world.⁴²

In the nine-year interval between the two EVSSG studies, there were no dramatic changes in levels of religious belief across the European countries surveyed. However, using figures available for 1957 and 1968 the decline in belief in God and in life after death is remarkable, moving from an average 68 per cent belief in God in 1947 to 57 per cent in 1990, and from 59 per cent belief in life after death in 1947 to 38 per cent in 1990.⁴³

The 1990 survey provides an overview of the state, in Europe of the day, of 'orthodox belief' i.e. belief in the basic tenets of Christian teaching, relating to God,

⁴² *What Europe Thinks*, Aldershot: Dartmouth, p. 33.

⁴³ *What Europe Thinks*, p.42**

life after death, heaven, the devil, hell, sin and the resurrection of the dead. On each aspect of religious belief studied, only the figures from Northern Ireland approximate or exceed those of the Republic. The significant findings are represented in Table 3.14.

Table 3.14: Religious beliefs in Western Europe, Ireland and Northern Ireland 1990 (EVSSG)

	<i>European sample</i>	<i>Ireland</i>	<i>Northern Ireland</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Idea of God</i>	60	96	95
<i>Life after death</i>	43	77	n/a
<i>Heaven</i>	41	85	86
<i>Sin</i>	57	84	89
<i>Hell</i>	23	50	68
<i>Evil or the devil</i>	25	52	72
<i>Resurrection of the dead</i>	33	70	71

n/a: not available

Ashford and Timms examine the correlation between responses and certain characteristics of respondents: younger people expressed lower than average rates of belief, and ‘those at the extreme left of the left-right scale of political disposition characteristically believe in all the items to a much lesser extent than the average and than those at the other end of the scale’.⁴⁴ While ‘women in the sample as a whole report[ed] much higher rates of belief than men did, ... women in either full-time or part-time employment [were] more likely to express the average rates of belief’.⁴⁵ This last point was also borne out by the EVSSG survey results for Ireland.⁴⁶

As Ashford and Timms observe, no survey can capture exactly what is understood by respondents as they read the terms ‘God’, ‘heaven’ etc. given the

⁴⁴ *What Europe Thinks*, p. 41

⁴⁵ *What Europe Thinks*, p. 41.

⁴⁶ Hornsby-Smith and Whelan, *Values and Social Change*, p. 24.

complexity of the religious ideas involved. In Belgium belief in a *personal* God fell by ten percentage points between 1981 and 1990, while there was a slight increase in such a belief in Ireland (and Northern Ireland) at the same time.

The following points are significant in view of the fact that family emerged from the Values Survey as highly important. The 1981 and 1990 survey included an assessment of whether, in the view of the respondents, belief in God had a bearing on the making of a successful marriage. Those attending religious service at least once a month and those giving the highest importance to God in their lives emerged as much more likely to view the role of shared religious belief as positive in the construction of a successful marriage. Women not in employment, younger respondents, those of leftist views, and those whose education went on longest were least likely to view a sharing of religious faith as very important to the quality of their marriage. In Ireland in 1990 over 30 per cent of the whole sample had a positive view of the role of shared religious belief in relation to marriage, while in West Germany the figure was 14 per cent. These figures had dropped by about six per cent in the interval between the two surveys. Results for the importance of religion in the rearing of children were similarly varied. In Ireland in 1990, 57 per cent of respondents answered positively. (Contrast France: 13 per cent.)

The role of religion in finding meaning in life was also examined in the surveys. Only in Ireland and Northern Ireland do 'something over half of the population use an idea of God alone to make life and death meaningful'.⁴⁷ In relation to the meaning of life and death, it is those who participate with some regularity in church who rely on the idea of God.

⁴⁷ *What Europe thinks*, p.44

3.4.2 Religious Practice

Between 1981 and 1990 the proportion of the population of Europe which reported not belonging to any religion was doubled. The percentage change for Ireland in that period was 67.5 per cent. What masks the change in the Irish situation is the very low base-line from which the change is being measured, i.e. just over 1 per cent of the population⁴⁸. While membership must not be equated with practice, figures for practice are nevertheless informative (Table 3.15). The variations in 1990 across the ten European countries surveyed were clearly remarkable. At that time, the level of practice in Ireland stood out as exceptional.

Table 15: Frequency of church attendance in European countries in 1990

	<i>Great Britain</i>	<i>N. Ireland</i>	<i>R. of Ireland</i>	<i>W. Germany</i>	<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>Belgium</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Spain</i>	<i>Portugal</i>
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<i>At least</i>	13	49	81	19	21	23	10	40	33	33
<i>Weekly</i>										
<i>Monthly</i>	10	18	7	15	10	8	7	13	10	8
<i>Christmas</i>										
<i>Easter</i>	12	6	6	16	16	13	17	23	15	8
<i>Once a</i>										
<i>Year</i>	8	7	1	9	5	4	7	4	4	4
<i>Rarely/never</i>	56	18	5	41	47	52	59	19	38	47

3.4.3 Attitudes to Church and its role in society

In relation to the last point the EVSSG surveys attempted to gauge the participants' views on the role of church in wider society and on the adequacy of church response. The average of responses indicated higher support for church voice on issues of social justice, than on personal issues or government policy. On a range of social

⁴⁸ See Table 3.01, Page 65, above

issues, the average response in support for church speaking out ranged from 45 per cent (on the issue of unemployment) to 76 per cent (in relation to Third World). On unemployment, the response in Ireland was a full 32 percentage points above the average, while on ecology, 59 per cent of Irish respondents supported a church voice, compared with a 50 per cent European average.

The lowest average response in support of a church voice on a personal issue was with regard to homosexuality (35 per cent), and in increasing order, extra-marital affairs, euthanasia, and abortion (52 per cent). The response in Ireland was above average and the highest recorded on three issues - the Northern Ireland response on Euthanasia was the highest. There was little consistency between the countries surveyed, as regards the proportion of the population who declared allegiance to a religious denomination. Finally, only 22 per cent, on average, of respondents supported a church voice on government policy. The Irish response was 34 per cent, highest except for Northern Ireland at 41 per cent.

In the interval between the surveys there was a small decline in the percentage of respondents who had a positive opinion of the adequacy of the Churches' response to individual and family problems. Very interestingly, the sharpest drop on each count is in Ireland – from 42 to 34 per cent on individual problems, and from 47 to 35 per cent on family problems.⁴⁹ The comparative stability in the position in most of the countries (with the exception of Northern Ireland) might suggest that a plateau of sorts had been reached in the standing of church in these countries. The significant changes in the response rates in Ireland could be taken as indicative of a 'catching up' on the processes of secularisation. However, how secularisation may be understood has already been discussed in

chapter 2.

The overall picture of attitudes in Ireland vis-à-vis Europe suggests that in 1990 the Church in Ireland, as an institution, was well placed to be a relevant participant in the dialogues of personal and social life. However, by 1998 this situation had changed significantly. On the one hand social and cultural change had fostered the growth of pluralism, and on the other, public scandals in the Church had undermined to a significant extent the standing of the church in Irish society.

3.5 CONCLUSION

It has already been remarked that among the reasons given for attending Mass the idea of assembly/community was notably absent, except in the Weafer study (1992) responses. Whether or not this was due to questionnaire design and/or administration, or to the respondents themselves⁵⁰ or to the individualistic character of the celebration has not been established. Inglis questions the motivation of 'traditional' Irish Catholicism and suggests that social acceptance and advancement were motivating forces at least as significant as the hope of eternal reward.⁵¹ Only the SRU survey raises this issue directly. Mac Gréil found that the 'vast majority of the people [78 per cent] do not favour taking an applicant's religion into consideration when he or she is considered for a responsible public position.'⁵² When asked whether being a member of his or her denomination was an advantage

⁴⁹ In the RDU survey 1884, 37 per cent of Irish Catholics were found to have 'some difficulty' with the Church's teaching, and in the MRBI survey in 1998 significant majorities ranging from 58 to 70 per cent of respondents disagreed with the church's attitude on a selection of issues.

⁵⁰ See above, p. 16.

⁵¹ *Moral Monopoly*, p. 93.

⁵² *Religious Practice and Attitudes*, p. 31.

or disadvantage in 'getting on', 44 per cent saw their religion as at least a slight advantage (27 per cent said 'great advantage') while 55 per cent considered it was neither an advantage nor a disadvantage.

Nowhere in the surveys was there a question on respondents' perception of the role of the priest in the local church, or of church leadership bodies at other levels. The MRBI survey did ask for an assessment of the performance of priests. 72 per cent thought the performance was good.⁵³

Another area of experience in church over the last two to three decades that was not covered by any of the surveys was that of participation of lay people in the ministry or administration of parish. While it has been suggested that such openings have been taken up largely by the 'articulate middle-class enthusiasts ... in open competition with older forms of clerical domination',⁵⁴ this is by no means universally true. Future surveys of the Catholic experience must surely include questions relating to this aspect of church today. Finally, the surveys did little to identify respondents' awareness of or commitment to the Christian mission of the church in context of family, work and social life, to justice issues or to social care as an expression of religious belief.

It is possible to enumerate the trends which have emerged from this examination of the surveys of religion in Ireland, 1997-1998. (1) It is clear from all the surveys that ever since 1974 *young people* have been more and more likely than those who went before them to move away from church. A cohort-shift has been evident since that time – contributing to the very significant overall drop – and suggesting that the change among young people is not entirely age-related, but rather

⁵³ 84 per cent of rural dwellers, 87 per cent of class F respondents, 62 per cent of the 18-24 age group and 59 per cent of the 25-34s. 8 per cent overall thought the performance was poor.

⁵⁴ Hornsby-Smith, *Roman Catholic Beliefs in England*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 8.

influenced by the radically transformed socio-economic and cultural environment in which they grow up. (2) *Urban dwellers* are also notable among those who now attend church in much smaller proportions, a point which is directly related to the issue of community/belonging, which is central to this work. (3) It would appear, on the one hand, that those with higher *educational attainments* are less likely to attend church, or to be guided by church teaching, and yet there is evidence (CRD, SRU and MRBI surveys) that the level of sacramental participation by those in this category who do attend is quite high. (4) The impact of *deprivation* is unclear. While the most recent figures (MRBI) suggest that lower social class respondents were the least likely to move away from church, the EVSSG research, and the RTE documentaries already referred to suggested otherwise. The balance of the evidence would seem to indicate that those who are socially excluded in economic and social terms also consider themselves irrelevant to the Church, and church irrelevant to them, in so far as they see it identified with the *status quo*. (5) Regarding *gender*, the most interesting outcome of the research is the difference between men and women is related to socio-economic status, with women in employment approximating to the average position. It is arguable that as women attain equal standing with men in the social context in general, differences in relation to church will become less. Moreover, in the contemporary social climate, unequal treatment of women and men in church becomes less and less acceptable. In view of the centrality of women in the processes of education, and their traditional dedication to many of the works which uphold the life and structures of parishes, it is of vital importance that the implications of a growing alienation of women be considered very seriously.

It is inevitable that there was, within the experience of respondents to all the surveys, a lot more than was told, relating to religious belief and practice. Even a

qualitative method would not succeed in mapping the total reality of people's faith experience. It is arguable that it is only the method of critique⁵⁵ which has the potential to unlock the complexity of such a subject, in that it involves the researcher in a process of knowing and understanding the origin and evolution of what is under review. At the same time it commits him or her to engagement with developments into the future. This is my chosen method of working in this dissertation. An empirical and theoretical base has now been drawn up. There is much to suggest that religion in Ireland need not follow the European pattern exactly, even while it belongs in a socio-economic and cultural context which is progressively more like that of Europe. The deciding factors are critical awareness and directed action.

The theological concepts which will emerge in Part II, reflected on with reference to the sociological context already characterised, will I hope give rise to a programme of practical applications in the parish pastoral setting in the Irish context, and will indeed commit me to 'engagement with developments'.

⁵⁵ See Colin Fletcher, *Beneath the Surface: an Account of Three Styles of Sociological Research*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974.

Chapter 4

THE DEVELOPING SELF-UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICE OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

In this chapter my aim is to study the early Christian communities in the period of their formation. Clearly, the ways in which these communities understood themselves and ordered their lives can be expected to provide foundational material for a theology of church as community today. Nevertheless it must be remembered that these communities existed almost exclusively within the political, social and cultural context of the Roman Empire, and that the focus of this dissertation is the local church community of the parish, situated within Western, European, Irish society on the cusp of the third millennium. While it is true that there is a tradition which spans the twenty centuries intervening, it is also clear that the self-understanding and practice of the early communities alone cannot provide a blueprint for how the life and mission of contemporary Christian communities might be understood and structured. This holds despite the fact that the pluralism and 'secularisation' of present-day Western society means that the church is in a minority situation in some ways analogous to its pre-Constantinian period.

Any attempt to study the early church communities in their social contexts encounters the difficulty that the accounts which we have were not written with a view to providing information about their social background. Gerd Theissen observes that religious tradition has a notable tendency to 'mask its moorings in human activity, preferring to speak of the gods' activity or to testify to an experienced reality lying beyond the world of human sense perception'.¹

¹*The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity [Social Setting]*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982, p.175.

Nevertheless, through the methods of historical-critical scholarship, profiles of the social settings of the first Christian communities, and of their responses have been compiled.

In the first section of this chapter I will indicate the sources which I will use in a search for an emerging theology of Church in the early communities, and discuss the hermeneutical issues involved in constructing a relationship between these accounts and the self-understanding and faith-praxis of the Church today. A study of the early communities will, of necessity, move between historical and sociological review (made possible by historical-critical studies) on the one hand, and theological analysis and reflection on the other, and a degree of overlapping will be inevitable. I will offer a brief overview of the developing understanding of the church in the gospels of Matthew, Luke and John and the Johannine letters. I will then select the accounts of the communities of Antioch and Corinth for closer historical, sociological and theological study. This selection is guided by three criteria, namely the extent and accessibility of the Scriptural and other texts, the diversity which the communities represent, and the possibility of finding in them, or related texts, the principal themes of Paul's theology of church. I will then trace four such themes in the early letters of Paul. I will continue my exploration of the developing theology and structure of the church in the writings of the Early Christian Fathers. In these also I will highlight the diversity and the common themes as well as the move towards the institutional form in which the church became established as the religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century. It becomes evident in this necessarily limited overview that there is a need for critical reflection, at all times, on contemporary understanding and practice of the church, and also for a commitment to continually retrieve any traits of earlier phases which, although submerged or lost

temporarily, can be authenticated as truly apostolic. I will conclude with a discussion of the normative characteristics of Christian community which are supported by the study, and indicate points in the ecclesiology and praxis of the early communities which can be correlated with those of today, in particular in the context of the parish with which I am concerned.

4.1 SOURCES AND HERMENEUTICAL ISSUES

4.1.1 Biblical and Patristic Sources

The scriptural accounts of the beliefs and practice of the early communities have always held a central place within the Christian churches. It must be remembered, however, that within the communities of those who followed Jesus the earliest traditions were oral. While the apostles and apostolic leaders of the early church lived, their testimonies and their judgements were determining factors in how the communities understood themselves and interpreted the implications of their new-found belief within the wider context of Greco-Roman society. (As the studies below will indicate, even then human factors and environmental circumstances gave rise to diversity and internal struggle.) From c50 CE onwards, the letters of Paul, and (later) written accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus and of the early church became important sources of authority. At the same time developments in church structure in response to new challenges were becoming evident.² The sources which I will consult for this study of the developing self-understanding and practice of early Christian communities are New Testament texts and writings of the early Christian Fathers, particularly of the first three centuries..

² Between A.D. 64 and 70 the consequences of two events (the fire in Rome and the fall of Jerusalem) and the culmination of a trend (the dying off of the apostles and other key leaders of the early church) would interact to confront a new generation of leaders with a quite different set of challenges and

4.1.2 Hermeneutical Issues

Once the authenticity of texts such as *I Clement* and the letters of Ignatius of Antioch had been established in the second half of the nineteenth century, the contribution of such non-biblical material to a study of the early communities was recognised.³ The reading of the Fathers since then has been in the light of the hermeneutical awareness of the day, which will be incorporated into what follows. On the other hand, the history of the self-understanding of Christian faith communities is inextricably bound from the beginning to the history of interpretation of biblical texts. For the early communities, the sacred writings were the Hebrew Scriptures, and the hermeneutical challenge for the first Christians was to interpret their experience within the Jewish tradition. In the present-day Christian church the writings of the New Testament are foundational, and biblical and theological hermeneutics engage with the place of these and the first Testament in the development of Christian theology.

From the outset neither Israel nor the Christian community was ‘a religion of the book’.⁴ In both cases experiences regarded as divine intervention and believed in as such by the communities preceded written accounts of those events and that faith. Nevertheless, as Jeanrond observes:

Since it is the very nature of the Christian church to reflect upon God’s self-disclosure as witnessed by the biblical texts, these texts have always held a prominent and normative status in the Christian community.⁵

Brown is more specific: ‘After the fourth century and a relatively finalized canon, the

circumstances from those faced by their predecessors.’ J.B. Lightfoot, J.R. Harmer and M.W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers, [Apostolic Fathers]*, Leicester: Apollos, 1989, p. 5.

³ see Lightfoot, Harper and Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, p.13-14.

⁴ cf. R.E. Brown, ‘Hermeneutics’, *New Jerome Biblical Commentary [NJBC]*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1990, 71:5.

⁵ *Theological Hermeneutics*, p. 10.

written Christian Bible reached a new status in authority for Church belief'.⁶

Jeanrond identifies the issues arising from this status as:

... adequate criteria for biblical interpretation and the question of who has the competence and authority to validate such criteria as well as any particular act of interpretation in terms of such a set of accepted criteria.⁷

From the earliest days of the Christian church debate regarding methods of interpretation has ranged between two poles, from the Alexandrian orientation to allegory and the literal approaches of the Antiochenes onwards.⁸ Mediation between literal and spiritual reading of Scripture has always challenged theology as it situates its task in relation to the biblical texts. Augustine's synthesis represented an important development. As Jeanrond observes, 'he advocated a thorough linguistic analysis of a text in order to control the accompanying spiritual reading of it'.⁹

Historical-critical and linguistic approaches to biblical interpretation confer an important dialectical character on all considerations of reading Scripture and its relation to faith-praxis in the Christian community. Jeanrond identifies three possible approaches which can be taken to sourcing the 'Christian vision for this world'¹⁰ (1) The 'orthodox' approach, which by rejecting the 'alien' influence of insights from philosophical hermeneutics claims to protect 'the integrity of the sacred texts'. In Jeanrond's view, 'Barth is as representative of this approach as is the

⁶ *NJBC*, 71:5. However, Brown continues: 'Even then one can argue that hermeneutics of the "book" never became as directly determinative before 1500 as it did after the Reformation or especially as it has become in the last centuries in fundamentalist strains of American Protestantism.

⁷ *Theological Hermeneutics*, p. 10.

⁸ Brown, *NJBC*, 71: 37, demonstrates the naivete of 'heroicizing' the exegetical school of Antioch as the 'champion of critical exegesis'. He points out the mutual influences of the two schools.

⁹ Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics*, p.22. The 'dominant non-literal cast [of] medieval exegesis' (see Brown, *NJBC*, 71:39) is counterpointed, for example, by scholars of the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris. For example, Andrew of St. Victor cultivated interest in Hebrew, and in the technical tools of interpretation. The development of Thomistic theology as a discipline distinct from exegesis was influential in reducing the central role of the 'spiritual' sense of biblical texts.

¹⁰ *Theological Hermeneutics*, p. 163.

current Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church'.¹¹ (2) The post-liberal view, which favours an internal approach and relies on a church-based biblical theology to inform its relationships. Lindbeck and Hans Frei represent this position, in Jeanrond's opinion.¹² (3) Finally, there is the approach that wants 'an open-ended dialogue on method' so that the 'mutually critical correlations' between general philosophical hermeneutics and biblical interpretation may be explored. This approach recognises the necessity of historical-critical work while at the same time welcoming the contributions of contemporary literary-hermeneutical approaches. The latter are interested primarily in 'present meaning mediated by language through interpretation rather than in historical meanings uncovered by exegesis...'.¹³ David Tracy and Hans Kung stress the need for this dialogue.¹⁴

Four issues arise from hermeneutical debate for contemporary readings of the biblical accounts of early Christian communities, with a view to engaging them in a dialogue with the faith-praxis of contemporary church: (1) the origin of the texts being read is clearly a key question to be addressed. From whom, from where and when did they emerge? To whom were they addressed and in what social context? And why? (2) Regarding the nature of the texts, it is considered important to ascertain their genre and style, so as to adopt an appropriate reading perspective and to carry out 'adequate readings'. The historical-critical and form-critical considerations that are reflected in these two issues are essential if the revelatory

¹¹ *Theological Hermeneutics*, p. 163. The document published in 1993 by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, while holding the traditional position on the role of the Magisterium, has been widely acknowledged for its balancing of the contributions to biblical interpretation of historical-critical scholarship and modern and post-modern linguistic and other approaches.

¹² *Theological Hermeneutics*, p. 163.

¹³ Sandra Schneiders, *NJBC*, 71:70.

¹⁴ *Theological Hermeneutics*, p. 163.

potential of the texts is to be realised. They also protect the readings from any possible fundamentalism. (3) The notion of assessment in reading is not limited to the material critique of the text. Critique of the reading self is vital when reading is seen as conversation between the reader and the text. Modern hermeneutics emphasises the danger of circular reasoning, unless the reader's pre-suppositions are brought to consciousness and held open to critique by the text, even while they inform the reader's address *to* the text. It is here that the tradition within which the reading is taking place will exert its influence. The locus for application of this dissertation is primarily the Roman Catholic Church community. This is not to say that the presuppositions that are operative in the reading to follow are limited by magisterial pronouncements, though they are encouraged by the most recent document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission.¹⁵ A critical and self-critical stance on the part of the reader avoids entirely subjective interpretations, and also preserves the reading from being narrowly ideological. (4) A community of readers is implied in the issue just raised. Whether the reader is professional (preacher, teacher, scholar) or a general reader, as believer, reference to an interpretative community is essential. That community may be within church, academy, or peers respectively. This dissertation is primarily situated within the academic community, with practical application, as already indicated, within the Roman Catholic Church.

4.2 THE CHURCH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT (1)

My aim in this section is to present a brief overview of the church in relevant texts of the New Testament: the gospels of Matthew, Luke and John, the Johannine letters, the letters of Paul, with reference also to the later Pauline writings. In view of the pivotal role played by Paul in the transition from the village culture of Palestine to

¹⁵ See note 11.

the cities of the Graeco-Roman world his engagement with the communities which he founded will be studied closely.

4.2.1 The Church in the Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John and the Johannine letters

The New Testament is entirely the product of the early church. Its texts have in common, across great diversity of authorship, literary category, style and purpose the fact that they witness to the life and mission of Jesus, and to the existence and way of life of communities of people who believed in him. The New Testament accounts actually indicate much diversity among early followers of 'the Way'. Even between those communities that originated from the same 'apostolic' source, there is evidence of quite different character and self-understanding.¹⁶

The expansion of Christianity to the West – the foundation of what later became the official religion of the Empire¹⁷ – is sometimes assumed to have evolved only from the Pauline tradition. Meier and Brown contest this assumption, claiming that 'the somewhat-right-of-Paul strains of Christianity that emerged at Antioch and Rome in association with Peter were a key factor in the emerging church catholic'.¹⁸ However, the fact remains that the 'emerging church catholic' quickly became a church that did not require that new adherents would first accept the initiation and regulations of the Jewish religion. This situation came about primarily through the insights and struggles of Paul. For this reason, a more detailed study will be made

¹⁶ See, for example, R.E. Brown, *The Critical Meaning of the Bible*, London: Chapman, 1981, Ch. 8, p. 146. Brown illustrates how 'the manner and exercise of supervision varied greatly in the different places and different periods within the ...NT era'.

¹⁷ Recent studies of Paul highlight his opposition to Roman imperialism, and interpret his missionary activities in terms of building 'an international alternative society'. R. Horsley, *Paul and Empire, Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society [Paul and Empire]*, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1997, p.8. This idea will be explored further in section 4.3 below.

¹⁸ John P. Meier and Raymond E. Brown, *Antioch and Rome, New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity [Antioch]*, London: Chapman, 1983, p. viii.

below of a sample of the communities which he founded, and of the theology of church as it emerges, particularly, in his early letters to them.

In the study of the church at Antioch in section 4.3 the connection between the situation of that community, especially after the destruction of the temple, and the presentation of the Church in Matthew's gospel will be discussed. While supporting Jewish Christians in their transition from the symbolic and authority-structures of Judaism, Matthew's aim was 'to preserve both old and new, from the proper hermeneutical perspective of the new'.¹⁹ Thus, as Meier summarizes: 'The term *ekklesia* ... means for Matthew the church as a visible structure and society, having authoritative officials and authoritative functions.'²⁰

While (in Matthew's gospel) Jesus presents himself as the fulfillment of the Law of Israel (5:17-20), Matthew does not limit his vision of the church to those of Jewish origin. Rather, Matthew's church is clearly open to all who, by producing good fruit, prove that they belong to the kingdom (13:38). That salvation is not a question of ethnicity but of faith is demonstrated in the healing of the centurion's servant (8:5-13).

Beker claims that, of all the gospels, Matthew has been the most influential in the history of the church.²¹ He names the identity and authenticity of the church as a main concern of this gospel. It is the church of the one who is both the lowly Messiah and the 'Lord', as shown by his miracles and his authoritative teaching. The church is built, in Matthew, on the rock which is Peter, (16:18) and embodies the power of 'binding' and 'loosing' (16:19). There where the church is, as 'two or three', Christ is present (18:20), and his presence will endure (28:20). Beker points

¹⁹ *Antioch*, p. 60.

²⁰ *Antioch*, p. 66.

²¹ *New Testament*, p.79.

out, however, that within the Christian church of Matthew, Jewish practices still obtain, by contrast with other presentations, notably that of John.

Internally, the church is characterised by communal concern, equality and service. The so-called 'community rule' in 18:1-20 details how the followers are to conduct themselves. Above all, the law of love is to be paramount (22:37-40). Matthew's understanding of church as a mixture of good and evil (13:47-50) is reflected in the parables – the grain and the weeds, the ten maidens, the talents, and the sheep and the goats. In the time of waiting for the coming of the kingdom, there is a need for vigilance and right action. In a world which is hostile to the gospel, keeping faith, which overcomes doubt and fear, is the means of salvation.

While stressing the dimensions of its newness and its universality, Matthew supports and develops the idea of continuity between the church and Israel. This continuity is also an important motif in Luke-Acts (Luke 4:16-30). For Luke, Jesus is the fulfillment in history of God's plan of salvation. In him, as evidenced in his teaching and his healing, the kingdom of God is present (11:20). The church, situated in time between Jesus' departure from sight and his return, is the custodian of God's promise and as such is presented in an idealized unity, holiness and apostolicity.²² Anointed with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the disciples are missioned as Jesus was (Luke 4:18). By breaking bread 'in remembrance' (Luke 22:19), the community of the disciples fulfill his command. In their work they encounter suffering as Jesus did (Acts 7:54-60). The Gentile author of Acts recounts the missionary activity of Paul through whom God fulfills the promise, not only to Israel but 'to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8). In his farewell speech to the Ephesian elders (20:19-35) Paul leaves the church and its mission in the care of the overseers.

²² See comments on the Council of Jerusalem, p. 108, below.

Luke establishes the church in time and place, suggests its 'apostolic' constitution and assigns to it a mission in the world. In Beker's view, Luke marks the beginning of the apologetic literature.²³

The Johannine gospel and letters undertake to translate the good news of Christ into concepts intelligible to its Hellenistic readers. H. Richard Niebuhr observes that 'in doing so they lift ideas about Logos, knowledge, truth and eternity to new levels of meaning by interpreting them through Christ.'²⁴ In John then, the church is the dynamic community of the 'spiritually endowed'.²⁵ Communal images for the church in John's gospel include the flock (10:16) which is tended by the good shepherd and the branches which are united with the vine (15:1-8). The reality of church as community is made more explicit in 1 John and those who are in contention with the community are the ones who 'went out from us, for they did not belong to us' (2:19).

The Johannine church believes in itself as a place within the world (which in the fourth Gospel paradoxically signifies both that which is opposed to Christ, and that which is Spirit-filled through Christ) where deep communion with God is possible, and will bear fruit. There is an emphasis on the unity of the church in the fourth gospel, a unity which is essential if Christ is to draw the church into the communion of the Trinity. (17:21), and if the world is to believe that Jesus is sent by the Father (17:23). In reality, an institutional structure to express and foster unity was largely absent in the Johannine churches. The letters present a picture of the church as 'a collection of "house churches" clustered around a central area and

²³ *New Testament*, p.98.

²⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, New York: Harper and Row, 1951, p.196-197.

²⁵ J. Christiaan Beker, *The New Testament, a Thematic Introduction [New Testament]*, Fortress Press, 1994, p.107.

linked together by travelling missionaries'.²⁶ They also imply schism between Johannine Christians, with some groups amalgamating with Christians from other churches. (Perkins suggests that the acknowledgement of Petrine authority in Jn 21 may have made this possible.) Others may have been absorbed by second-century gnosticism. Consideration of the Johannine churches draws attention to the importance of both *charism* and *institution* to ecclesial life and mission. The hermeneutical need to use biblical texts in relation to the totality of the revelation is pointed up by the Johannine accounts of church.

In summary of what has emerged so far, the very early Christian communities, the first churches, manifested considerable diversity in their understanding themselves as church. This diversity depended on their own characteristics and contexts. Thus the idea of the visible organisation of believers in Matthew contrasts to some degree, and also complements, the interiority and fluidity of the Johannine view. At the same time common themes emerge: Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise of God to Israel, but he does not confine himself in his living or teaching to interaction with the Jewish people. Through his teaching his signs (Matthew) Jesus is the inaugurator of the reign of God (Luke). He calls and effects a transformation in those who chose to follow (John). The community of his followers may understand themselves variously but the central motifs of Messiah and kingdom impact on their understanding of who they are and what their calling is.

While Matthew recognises the existence of good and evil with the communities of Jesus' followers, and Luke (in Acts) presents an idealised picture of the early church, all the New Testament writings agree on the essential charity which must characterise believers in their relationship with one another. The church's

²⁶ PHEME PERKINS, 'The Johannine Community', *New Jerusalem Biblical Commentary*, 61:11, p. 946.

attitude to the world, based on that of Jesus, is marked by ambivalence in all the sources. Believers must be vigilant (Matthew) yet compassionate (Luke), prepared to meet opposition but confident of ultimate victory (John). The church is the community of those who have been anointed by the Holy Spirit and missioned as Jesus was (Luke). It is as people sent to be the sacrament of Christ's presence and mission in the world that the Christian communities celebrate Eucharist. At the same time they express and nourish the deep communion which has been established by Jesus between his followers and the godhead, through him and in the Spirit – a communion which is essential to the witness which the church must give (John).

4.3 THE CHURCH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT (2): ANTIOCH AND CORINTH

4.3.1 Jews and Gentiles: Controversy in the *Ekklesia* at Antioch

After Rome and Alexandria, Antioch was a city of prime importance in the ancient world. Its location on the river Orontes close to the north-eastern corner of the Mediterranean, at a cross-roads between East and West gave rise to a thriving political, military, commercial and cultural centre. Within its Greco-Roman society there existed a large, ancient Jewish colony which was held in high standing. Here many non-Jews, also, responded favourably to the monotheism and ethical standards of the Jewish religion and associated themselves with it.

It is generally accepted that Antiochene Jews and their 'Greek' associates began to hear the message and to follow 'the Way' from the 30s onwards. The first 'apostolic' representative to go or be sent to Antioch, according to New Testament accounts, was Barnabas²⁷. Downey suggests that the novelty of Greek converts may

²⁷ cf. Meier, *Antioch*, p.33. Meier debates whether the writer of Luke-Acts is purposely bringing the missionary activity of Barnabas under the aegis of Jerusalem, and refers to the argument that Barnabas, himself a Cypriot, could have been among the scattered Cypriot and Cyrenean Hellenists who began the Gentile mission at Antioch.

have given rise to this interest on the part of the Jerusalem leaders²⁸. This very 'novelty' was in fact to lead to the vigorous debates which ensued, centred on what should constitute initiation into and fidelity within the 'Christian'²⁹ community, in particular for converts from outside of the Judaic tradition.

It is widely accepted, as recounted in Acts, that it was to Antioch – and to Barnabas – that Paul gravitated following his conversion and his sojourn in the Nabataean kingdom.³⁰ And it is Paul who applies his insights and understanding of Christ to the question, when it arises, of how non-Jews are to be integrated into the community of Christ's followers. His position on the question of obligatory circumcision was radical, clear and contentious, and warranted the attention of Jerusalem.

In the controversy, which erupted first at Antioch, about the relationship of the new Christian teaching to the Jewish tradition a central point of disagreement, and one closely related to the circumcision debate, was that of table-fellowship. Much work has been done to contextualise and so highlight the significance of this issue.³¹ The detail of this scholarship is not of immediate concern here. Rather, what is most relevant is the equality and inclusiveness that is upheld by Paul. Christians, circumcised or not, should be willing to share meals and especially the Lord's supper together. In the matter of eating meat sacrificed to idols, Paul claims that since the Christians believe in only one God, the so-called sacrifices are meaningless, and therefore the notion that meat used in pagan ritual is in some way

²⁸ Downey, 'Antioch', *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, G.A. Butterick, et. al. (eds), New York: Abington Press, 1962, p. 147.

²⁹ It will be remembered that it was at Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians'. Acts 11:26

³⁰ W. Meeks, *Urban Christians*, p. 10.

³¹ For an account of one ongoing interpretative discussion of the meaning of the points at issue. see for example, P. Esler, *The First Christians in their Social Worlds*, London; Routledge, 1994, p. 67.

'sacred' is also without basis. To partake of such is certainly not idolatrous, as the Jewish Law declared. On the other hand, participation in pagan cultic practice is of course out of the question for Christians. This issue raises the related questions of definition and boundaries. If neither circumcision nor strict observance of the Law is required, then what will replace them as identity-formative symbols for Christians?

The effect of the argument is to leave the issue of the Christian group's boundaries somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, social intercourse with outsiders is not discouraged... [while, on the other hand] the exclusivity of cult, which had been a unique mark of Judaism ... would remain characteristic also of the Pauline congregations. The emphasis in Paul's paraenesis, however, is not upon the maintenance of boundaries, but upon internal cohesion: the mutual responsibility of members, especially that of strong for weak, and the undiluted loyalty of all to the One God and One Lord.³²

For Paul, therefore, Baptism alone is required to mark the entry of new members into the community, and sharing in the Lord's Supper is open to all who have thus entered. The inclusiveness of these practices renders redundant the need to legislate for what Christians must or may otherwise do. Meeks emphasises Paul's view of Baptism as a boundary-establishing ritual:

All who enter the pure community must do so by being "washed" and "sanctified" and "justified" (1Cor.6:11). Furthermore, the whole ritual represents a dying and rising with Christ. It entails dying with respect to the structures and powers of the world (see Col.2: 20), "taking off" the "old human" with his vices and his divisions and entanglements, and putting on a new life in Christ, the "new human", distinguished by the unity of a new family of brothers and sisters, children of God.³³

The Lord's Supper provides 'symbolic expression of the group's solidarity and of its boundaries'.³⁴ It was the importance that Paul attached to the Lord's Supper that gave rise to his insistence that circumcision must not be made a condition of

³² Meeks, *Urban Christians.*, p.100.

³³ *Urban Christians*, p. 102.

³⁴ *Urban Christians*, p. 102.

participation. At another time, (1 Cor. 5:11; 2 Thess. 3:14) Paul indicates exclusion from the common meals, and Meeks is certain this includes Eucharist, as a 'mode of discipline for serious violators of the community's moral norms'.³⁵ The biblical foundations for a theology of Eucharist which places it at the centre of the life of the Christian community is evident in the account of the community at Antioch.

Whether Christianity was a reform movement within Judaism or a 'sect' with the implication that dual membership (of synagogue and *ekklesia*) was impossible has been the focus of scholarly attention. In view of the fact that, in the longer-term the universalist views of Paul prevailed, the 'sect' model seems the more appropriate. Indeed, in the post-Apostolic period it is the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem and Antioch (the 'Ebionites') who come to be considered a deviationist sect within Christianity.³⁶

4.3.2 Evolving Structures of Ecclesial Authority

Attention has already been drawn to the interplay of apostolic 'authorities' in difficult decisions within the community of believers at Antioch. Meier suggests that the account in Acts of the Council at Jerusalem may be based on a later model of church organisation. Whatever the facts of the case, neither Paul, Barnabas and those with them in Antioch on the one hand, nor Peter, James and those in Jerusalem on the other, questioned the appropriateness of referring to Jerusalem the difficulties being experienced in Antioch, at least for discussion, if not for legislation.

On Paul's account (Gal 2:2), he, Barnabas and some others decided 'on account of a revelation' (Gal. 2:2) to go to Jerusalem to discuss the vexed question. The writer of Acts describes them as a delegation sent from the strife-torn

³⁵ *Urban Christians*, p. 103.

³⁶ cf. Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, London: Penguin, 1967, pp. 22-23.

community. Paul and the Lucan author describe the proceedings in Jerusalem quite differently:

Luke is interested in presenting a basically harmonious situation, with Antioch submitting readily to Jerusalem, with Jerusalem defending the mission to the Gentiles without circumcision, and with James as the chief and climactic spokesman for the circumcision-free mission.³⁷

Meier suggests that Paul's own account 'while not free of a polemical bias'³⁸ has to be the primary source – and so we may suspect that the discussions in Jerusalem were more complex and more passionate than Acts would have us believe. Either way the outcome was indeed a decision that the Gentiles do not have to be circumcised. On either account, it was not the pillars of the Jerusalem church – Peter, James or John, who were upholding the Jewish practice in regard to circumcision, but rather, as Paul calls them, some 'false brothers'.³⁹ For Paul:

... the ethnic community is no longer the base [of membership]; Paul describes his own mission as primarily to "the gentiles", even though the unity of Jew and gentile within the *ekklesia* was a matter of central concern to him. Paul explicitly and emphatically rejected the ritual of circumcision and the other observance that distinguished Jew from gentile ...⁴⁰

The first outcome of the Jerusalem discernment regarding circumcision was favourable to Paul's position. In the light of later developments, however, it is arguable that the protagonists stopped short of resolving the crucial, related questions of observance of the Law and table-fellowship. While Peter interpreted the agreement liberally on his visit to Antioch, as shown by his joining with the gentiles in shared meals including the Lord's Supper, James' interpretation did not include table-fellowship with the uncircumcised. When Peter (influenced by James) withdrew from the common celebration, the second confrontation on the principle of

³⁷ Meier, *Antioch*, p. 36.

³⁸ *Antioch*, p. 36.

³⁹ See Gal 2:4

⁴⁰ Meeks, *Urban Christian*, p. 81.

Christian equality and inclusiveness resulted finally in the departure of Paul from Antioch. When similar problems arose in communities established by Paul, we have no record of further appeals to authority other than his own.

At Antioch Paul could envisage what would replace the Law in the new dispensation – namely allegiance to Christ and the community in the freedom which Christ had given. However, when he in turn was faced with the irresponsible liberalism of the Corinthians, he was the one to call them to order with vehemence. By the time the Pastorals came to be written, the writer (still invoking the authority of Paul) laid squarely on the shoulders of the *episcopus* the responsibility for orthodoxy and, by implication, for dealing with conflicting positions on important questions of doctrine and practice.⁴¹

After the departure of Paul, a compromise solution to the impasse over table-fellowship was found in the form of the so-called ‘kosher’ rules, which made possible the common celebration of the Lord’s Supper on the understanding that the gentile Christians observed four basic tenets of the Jewish law – the details of which are not immediately relevant. What is important is the development of the *ekklesia* as a function of external and internal changes which impacted on it between Paul’s departure and the writing (at Antioch, Meier argues⁴²) of the gospel of Matthew. The death of James in the 60s and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE were significant for the church at Antioch, in view of the influence both James and the Jerusalem community had had in the debates that have been described. From this time on ‘conservative Jewish Christians at Antioch and elsewhere would find it more and more difficult to put obstacles in the way of a full-scale ... mission to the gentiles...

⁴¹ This tradition has endured in Roman Catholic ecclesiology, strengthened by the Fathers, and continues to be enshrined in its official teaching. The centrality of the bishop in the theology of Vatican II, in particular its theology of the local Church will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

⁴² Meier, *Antioch*, p. 15 ff.

the church's main if not only, future'⁴³ Tensions between Jewish Christians and Jews were sharpened because of the war at Antioch as elsewhere. In Meier's view 'it was simply a matter of time before the break with the synagogue came' and Jewish Christians who continued to associate with gentile Christians would no longer be welcome there.⁴⁴ With the break the Christians lost the protection of the category of a legal religion which Judaism had enjoyed. Internally, these developments brought the sections of Christian community closer together but did not fully obliterate the differences which stemmed from their origins.

In this context Matthew may be read as 'a theological and pastoral response to a crisis of self-identity and function in the Antiochene church, a crisis that was social and structural as well as theological in nature'.⁴⁵ Religious symbols, institutional structures and a locus of authority were needed to replace the losses incurred through the break with the synagogue, the Temple, and Jerusalem. While Matthew is 'less abrasive' than Paul, Meier suggests that his inclusiveness 'was able to take in the practical if not the speculative aspects of Paul's vision'.⁴⁶ Matthew presents the church and its authority in terms of Christ, as author, working through the commission to Peter and from him through local institutions. Meier suggests that he is aware of a rising elitism, and warns about ostentation and the trappings of power (23:5).

The study of the community at Antioch has provided some important insights into the development in practice of a Christian community in a setting of relative social stability. Tensions arose however in the new group's relationship to its Jewish origins and laws while in transition to a new identity, and also in relation to its

⁴³ Meier, *Antioch*, p. 48.

⁴⁴ *Antioch*, p. 49.

⁴⁵ Meier, *Antioch.*, p. 57.

⁴⁶ *Antioch*, p. 63.

membership (criteria and implications), its liturgy and its leadership. The Christians at Corinth, by contrast, were largely non-Jewish, and in being more socially stratified and less secure in their tenure within their local community.

4.3.3 Social Stratification in The Christian Community at Corinth

The city of Corinth was the capital of the province of Achaia. Because of its location in control of two harbours, one facing the east and the other facing Italy, as well as the access by road to the interior, it had a busy and lucrative commercial life. Having been destroyed in a Roman offensive in 146, Corinth was rebuilt by Caesar in 44 BCE. From that time onwards it was progressively more Roman at least in its language and government. Meeks observes that ‘about half the persons connected in the New testament with the Corinthian church have Latin names, the others Greek’.⁴⁷

Corinthian society, having been regenerated and colonised with Roman freedmen⁴⁸ had no indigenous aristocracy. Its members, therefore, ‘had the rare opportunity to compete with one another for the marks of status that would enable them to *become* the local aristocracy’.⁴⁹ This they did by becoming benefactors of the city, in return for which they received recognition, honours and public office.⁵⁰ The handicrafts of Corinth were widely known in antiquity. As a new city it attracted entrepreneurs and encouraged individual ambition. Freedmen from Italy were joined by many people from Greek-speaking territories and it is known from Acts 18 and from Philo that there was also a Jewish community at Corinth.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Meeks, *Urban Christians*, p. 48.

⁴⁸ ‘a transitional category between slave and free’ *Urban Christians*, p. 21.

⁴⁹ *Urban Christians*, p. 48.

⁵⁰ In this connection the case of an Erastus who was a benefactor of the city and became the ‘city treasurer’ and Erastus who was a member of the Christian community is discussed at length by Theissen, *Social Setting*, pp. 80-83.

⁵¹ cf. Meeks, *Urban Christians*, p. 48.

Of the Christian communities established by Paul that at Corinth is known to us in greatest detail because of the volume of his correspondence with it, some of which is preserved in 1 and 2 Corinthians. Paul the urbanite and artisan could meet the citizens of Corinth on equal terms. Paul the citizen of Rome was not intimidated by social status and when Corinthian ambition became apparent within the community of believers Paul was fearless in addressing it.

While recognising the methodological issues referred to at the outset of this chapter, Theissen argues that Paul's assertion 'not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth'⁵² does yield a sociological profile of the community at Corinth. He claims that the Christians there, as a group, were characterised by internal social stratification that reflected that of the wider society. He supports his arguments with a review of statements made about individual members of the congregations – their offices, their houses (meaning households), services rendered (to Paul, other missionaries and the whole congregation) and their travel. While most of those named belong to higher classes it is clear that they are a minority within the community as a whole.⁵³ As further evidence for his thesis, Theissen argues from statements about divisions within the community at Corinth – those groupings which emerge at the Lord's Supper, those who can command the resources (financial and other) in support of missionaries, those who have the means and the confidence to take others to court, those whose wisdom and knowledge give them the greater freedom in relation to the Law, and those who in fact are slaves.⁵⁴

⁵² 1 Cor. 1:26-29, New Revised Standard Version.

⁵³ Theissen, *Social Setting*, p. 95.

⁵⁴ Theissen, *Social Setting*, pp. 73 – 96.

In conclusion, Theissen points out that social stratification within the Christian community at Corinth is evident:

There are structural causes of this social stratification which can be observed in the Corinthian congregation, causes which have their roots both in the social structure of the city of Corinth itself and in Paul's mission.⁵⁵

The studies represented in the above, brief overview were published in the main in the mid 1970s. In 1983 Wayne Meeks developed the idea of social class as used by Theissen, by analysing the concept of social status into constitutive dimensions, such as occupational prestige, wealth, education, religious purity, family and ethnic group position.⁵⁶ Meeks' clarification is helpful, for example, in recognising cases of 'status inconsistency'.⁵⁷ His analysis also prevents a too easy assumption that 'there was something in the early Greek City corresponding to the middle class of modern industrial society'.⁵⁸ Richard Horsley sums up the situation in Corinth:

Populated by the descendents of Roman riffraff and deracinated former slaves, Corinth was the epitome of urban society created by empire: a conglomeration of atomized individuals cut off from the supportive communities and particular cultural traditions that had formerly constituted their corporate identities and solidarities as Syrians, Judeans, Italians, or Greeks. As freedpeople and urban poor isolated from any horizontal supportive social network, they were either already part of or readily vulnerable for recruitment into the lower layers of patronage pyramids extending downwards into the social hierarchy as the power bases of those cambering for high honor and office expanded. Amidst all the luxuries provided by the increasingly munificent and honored elite, Corinthians had a reputation as uncultured and lacking in social graces, partly because the wealthy so grossly exploited the poor.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ *Social Setting*, p. 99.

⁵⁶ cf. Meeks, *Urban Christians*, p. 54.

⁵⁷ e.g. *Urban Christians*, p. 22. 'The rise of freedmen aroused deep resentment among many people who thought themselves their betters.'

⁵⁸ *Urban Christians*, p. 54. However, Horsley suggests that Meeks misses the implications of the Christian religion as a 'movement'. '1 Corinthians', p. 244, n 5.

⁵⁹ '1 Corinthians: a Case Study of Paul's Assembly' ['1 Corinthians'], in *Paul and Empire, Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, Richard Horsley (ed.), Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1997, p. 243.

The lack of any long-standing traditions in Corinth may have generated a certain readiness for the gospel message brought there by Paul. At the same time the converts to Christianity were still within a society where social ascendancy was most important. The thriving economy of Corinth was built on trade, banking, artisanship and the fact that it was the seat of the governor of Achaia. In such a mobile and self-conscious society

... [a] community like the Christian congregation in Corinth, encompassing various groups and classes, was in all probability confronted with special problems of integration because of its internal stratification.⁶⁰

Paul's success with certain members of the (gentile) upper classes at Corinth is interpreted structurally by Theissen. As 'God-fearers' they were, in all probability, among those who previously associated with the Jewish community. While conversion to Judaism was not an option for them,⁶¹ full identification with Christianity was attractive. Furthermore, Paul had much in common with the upper classes. While he appears to address the 'wise, powerful and esteemed' as if they were the whole community, he also challenges their self-importance by reference to the standards of God, who can use the foolish to confound the wise, the weak to shame the strong, the lowly to bring down the mighty. Moreover, he voluntarily places himself outside of his own class in the service of the gospel. While he supported himself by the work of his hands he did accept the hospitality of the members of the community.

The picture of the Christian community which emerges is therefore that of a socially-mixed group. Members of the upper classes, while in a minority, would appear to have been dominant in the life of the church from its earliest days. The

⁶⁰ Theissen, *Social Setting*, p. 102.

⁶¹ Because they stood to lose too much. cf. *Social Setting*, p. 103.

community was not free of the kind of ambitions that marked the wider Corinthian society. Tensions and divisions inevitably arose that deserve consideration.

4.3.4 Social Division and Paul's Response: the Primacy of Love

The letters of Paul to the Corinthians indicate at least three areas that were proving contentious within the life of the community. Quite early in the life of the church there, confusion had spread among the new converts regarding their mentors. 'Super-apostles', as Paul calls them, have superseded Paul in the eyes of some, and this is a cause of disunity and competition. Paul tries to restore perspective (and his own credentials) by insisting that all belong only to Christ.

Secondly, among the Jewish converts the 'strong' were appropriating the freedom that comes from faith in Christ and no longer binding themselves by the strict laws governing consumption of meat which might have been used in pagan sacrifice. This too was divisive because it was scandalising the 'weak'.⁶² In addition, the manner in which the Lord's Supper was being celebrated in the assembly of the church was a cause of grave concern for Paul, since the well-off were parading their wealth in the very setting which should be marked by equality and mutual care.

Finally the very gifts with which the Holy Spirit was blessing the community, principally that of speaking in tongues, were being allowed to cause exclusion of those who were unable to interpret them.

Theissen extends his sociological analysis to the theological quarrel regarding the food laws, and the difficulties of social integration at the Lord's Supper. In his view, these difficulties represent the playing out in the context of the church, of the

⁶² The implications of this controversy in terms of the Paul's missionary work in its social and political context, as interpreted by Richard Horsley, will be discussed below, p. 132.

struggles of the wider society. He finds the Pauline treatment of the quarrels and conflict to be characteristic of the leadership model espoused by Paul, namely that of 'love-patriarchalism'.⁶³

Meeks thematises the quarrels and conflicts at Corinth in terms of power and authority issues:

The conflicts are in large measure directly *about* authority; they are questions about who makes decisions and who has to obey, and why. Furthermore, the letters themselves are instruments used intentionally to exert authority; they therefore exhibit the strategies of influence that Paul and his co-workers thought would be effective.⁶⁴

By means of personal visits, emissaries, and letter, Paul teaches, exhorts and asserts his own authority in continuity with the apostles and ultimately with Christ. *I Clement* which was written around 94-96 CE indicates that strife and division (this time through internal power struggles over the leadership of the congregation⁶⁵) was again in evidence in the community at that time:

... we cannot think it right for [appointed men] ... to be ejected from their ministry, when, after being commissioned by the Apostles (or by other reputable persons at a later date) with the full consent of the Church, they have since been serving Christ's flock in a humble, peaceable and disinterested way ...⁶⁶

The image of the body is used by the author of *I Clement* to decry the disharmony in the Corinthian community:

Why are we rending and tearing asunder the limbs of Christ and fomenting discord against our own body? Why are we so lost to all sense and reason that we have forgotten our membership of one

⁶³ Theissen, *Social Setting*, pp. 106 – 110. n.87, p. 118 reads: 'The idea of love-patriarchalism is derived essentially from E. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (New York, 1931), I:69-89, and refers to that Christian patriarchalism which receives its special coloration from the warmth of the ideal of love (78). Troeltsch's concept turns on the "basic idea of the willing acceptance of fixed inequalities and of making them fruitful for the ethical values of personal relationships" (78).'

⁶⁴ Meeks, *Urban Christians*, p. 117.

⁶⁵ John Barclay, 'Social Contrasts in Pauline Christianity' ['Social Contrasts'], in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, (47) 1992, p.73.

⁶⁶ *I Clement*, 44, Maxwell Staniforth and Andrew Louth, *Early Christian Writings, The Apostolic Fathers [Early Christian Fathers]*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1987, p.41.

another?⁶⁷

In the urbanised culture of social settings such as Corinth (and almost all other settings of Pauline Christianity with which we are acquainted) Paul did not cultivate the 'ethical radicalism of the Jesus tradition, with its ethos of surrendering family, property, and home...'⁶⁸ Theissen relates this fact to the heterogeneity of the communities in question:

Christianity's transition from the rurally structured world of Palestine to the urban, Hellenistic culture of the Mediterranean world was probably accompanied by its penetration of the higher strata of society.⁶⁹

Paul accepts that social difference will exist within the community of believers. His response is that they should no longer matter, since all are equal in Christ, and there is an obligation on all to have mutual respect and love. In fact, it is the 'stronger' that have the more onerous obligations to look after those who are 'weak'.

This primitive Christian love-patriarchalism, with its moderate social conservatism, made a lasting impact on Christianity... It produced the church's fundamental norms and fashioned lasting institutions. It solved problems of organisation and prepared Christianity to receive the great masses.⁷⁰

In Theissen's view radical equality would (only) have been possible in socially homogeneous groups. Acceptance of social differences meant that members of the upper classes 'could find a fertile field of activity' ... [and those of] the lower strata ...found a fundamental equality of status before God [and] solidarity and help in the concrete problems of life...' ⁷¹ The writings of the early Fathers exemplify how 'love-patriarchalism' became an acceptable mode of being within the Christian

⁶⁷ *1 Clement*, 46, *Early Christian Writings*, p.42.

⁶⁸ Theissen, *Social Setting*, p. 107

⁶⁹ *Social Setting*, pp. 106-7.

⁷⁰ *Social Setting*, p. 108.

⁷¹ *Social Setting*, p. 108.

community of the second century and later.⁷²

It was the realistic acceptance of social inequality, held within a higher vision of the equality of all in Christ that made it possible, according to Theissen, for Constantine to ‘succeed with his religious policy’.⁷³ Whether this legacy to society has served history well in the long term is a discussion which is outside the scope of this work. Interpretation of the Christian message in its Corinthian setting, with its difficulties, has provided for Christian communities through the centuries some foundational texts on the priority of relationship over role or status, the understanding of charisms as for the benefit of community, and the primacy of love. The reflections of Paul on the implications, for the community of believers, of sharing in the Lord’s Supper are of primary importance.

Having studied in some detail the accounts of the early communities at Antioch and Corinth I will now draw from these and other Pauline writings four themes in Pauline ecclesiology.

4.4 THE CHURCH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT (3): PAULINE ECCLESIOLOGY

The early communities did not work out their self-understanding and practice from a coherent theology which was handed down to them. It has been noted of Paul’s communications with the churches which he founded that often he was responding to contingent situations as they arose.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, it is possible to outline the contours of a theology of church in Paul’s writings. As C.K Barrett observes: ‘Beyond the occasionalism of Paul’s thought there is a real unity; he reacts to circumstances spontaneously but he does not react at random; he reacts in

⁷² See section 4.5.1, p.132 below.

⁷³ *Social Setting*, p. 109.

⁷⁴ See, for example, J.C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle, the Triumphs of God in Life and Thought*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1980, Ch. 3, ‘Contingency and Coherence in Paul’s Letters’.

accordance with principles, seldom stated as such but detectable.’⁷⁵ What is required, according to Beker, is ‘a hermeneutical clarification of the relation between contextualism and thematic construal, of contingency and coherent center’.⁷⁶

Paul’s theology of church can also be viewed in relation to other ecclesiologies which were taking shape in the evangelists, who needed to present Paul as in harmony with the ‘apostolic college’.⁷⁷ Paul recounts that the crucified ‘Lord of glory’ was revealed dramatically to him. (1 Cor 2:8) . His response was one of faith, in which he proclaimed with believers, ‘Jesus is the Lord’ (1 Cor. 12:12). It is arguable that this foundational experience was influential in the emergence of four central themes which can be identified in Paul’s theology of church. Beker categorises these themes as ‘his reflections on Israel’s destiny, his apocalyptic eschatology, social solidarity, and cosmic theological horizon’.⁷⁸

4.4.1 The People of God: Continuity and Discontinuity with Israel

For the early Christians, the nature of their relationship to their Jewish tradition was a very important question. As illustrated in the accounts of the Antiochene and Corinthian communities, controversy and conflict lead within 30-40 years of the death of Christ to a break with the synagogue community and practice. One significant element of these debates was the status of the Law. Paul makes clear his attitude within the new dispensation in his treatment, which I have already discussed above in relation to Antioch and Corinth, of the issues relating to circumcision and the food laws. His treatment of Law in Galatians and Romans is more complete. The Law was given by God to Moses, and is therefore holy, righteous and good

⁷⁵ *Paul, An Introduction to His Thought, [Paul, Introduction]*, London: Chapman, 1994, p. 56.

⁷⁶ *Paul the Apostle*, p. 31.

⁷⁷ See, for example the Lucan author’s account of the Council of Jerusalem, above p. 108.

⁷⁸ *Paul the Apostle*, p. 35.

(Rom 7:12). It comes from God's love (9:4) and calls God's people to love (3:21; 10:6-8). The Law, however, is also seen by Paul as bringing out the sinfulness of human beings, and is therefore at once 'the word of God – always a gracious as well as a righteous God - and the instrument of death'.⁷⁹ It orders what is right, but it lacks the power to give life (Gal 3:21). It is not the Gospel (2 Cor 3:10). Paul's understanding of Jesus as Lord and fulfillment of the Law, implies the continuity of the Christian community (the *ekklesia* formed by faith) with the assembled people of God (the *qahal* of the Hebrew scriptures formed by Law).

The new community is continuous with the old precisely in the person of Jesus and nowhere else – a *nowhere* – that Paul emphasizes over against others who found and insisted on continuity based on the Law, so that those who would join must accept circumcision and observe the commandments.⁸⁰

Continuity, through Christ, of the Christian community with the people of Israel is expressed by Paul: 'If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise' (Gal 3:29, NRSV).

Paul's vision of a church whose identity and mode of being are based on Christ, which leads to his claim that there must be no longer any distinctions within the community of the church between 'Jew or Greek, ... slave or free, ... male and female (Gal 3:28) constitutes also a discontinuity between Israel and Christianity. This discontinuity is for Paul, symbolised by the cross, 'a stumbling block to Jew, and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.' (1 Cor 1:23b-24, NRSV). Nevertheless Paul claims that fulfillments of the promise to Israel is only possible in the church of Christ. (Eph 3:4-6)

⁷⁹ C.K. Barrett, *Paul, An Introduction to his Thought*, Louisville: Westminster: John Knox Press, 1994, p.80.

⁸⁰ C.K.Barrett, *Paul, Introduction*, p.120.

4.4.2 The Church and its Social Environment

The first Christian communities existed in quite varied settings, from the factious socially ambitious Corinth to the highly-charged cultural ethos of Thessalonica. The response of the Christian communities differs significantly in each context, to an extent that raises the question: did Paul vary his message, or was it variously interpreted? This question, among others, is discussed by John Barclay in his account of these communities, their relationship with their social environments, and Paul's view of its accordance or otherwise with the message which he has preached.⁸¹

In 1 Cor 15 Paul sets out the central Christian message: Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures; ... he was buried; and ... he was raised to life on the third day, in accordance with the scriptures. How then, Paul asks, can some of the Corinthians be saying that there is no resurrection from the dead? (1 Cor 15:12). In their view, for all who are 'in Christ' sin and death have been overcome, and they chose to consider themselves now living the new life of freedom, enjoying the gifts of the Spirit, wisdom and insight, tongues and the power of healing (1 Cor 12:9). They make little distinction between present and future glory, hence Paul's message that we are waiting for the Lord's return, for the *parousia*, is largely lost on his Corinthian believers.

Their privileged existence sets the Corinthian Christians apart, in their own estimation, from the common lot of human beings. Beker describes them as 'self-consciously and proudly marginal people in the world'.⁸² Paul challenges this elitism by reminding the Corinthians that Christians in the world are more like the 'first fruits' of Christ's victory, not the whole harvest (1 Cor 15:20-28). As such, they are

⁸¹ 'Social Contrasts'

⁸² *New Testament*, Fortress Press, 1994, p.16.

not removed from the world, but rather ‘instruments in God’s universal redemptive plan for the world’.⁸³

Beker points out the Greek influence on the Corinthians thinking regarding a future resurrection of the body:

As every good Greek knows, the material body is fundamentally a transient entity and ties us to this evil, temporary world. It simply cannot participate in spiritual reality. For what has my true self to do with my bodily liabilities? Plato had already stated that ‘the body is a tomb’.⁸⁴

It is perhaps not surprising that this attitude did not in fact give rise in all cases to a highly spiritualized existence, but rather existed side by side with a degree of licentiousness which called for Paul’s attention, as we shall see below.

Barclay posits the ‘social status of a dominant minority in the Corinthian Church’ as a factor of ‘some significance’ leading to their chosen perspectives and behaviour. However, he argues that continuing social interaction with outsiders is ‘at least as significant’.⁸⁵ Some of the Corinthian Christians, for example, were confident enough in their relationship with the legal system to use the civic law-courts to settle their disputes (1 Cor 6:1-6); there are those who continue to associate within the wider society to the point of participating in (non-cultic) ‘temple-dinners’ (1 Cor: 8-10). Thus these Corinthians minimise the grounds for conflict with their social and cultural environment. Outside of their liturgical gatherings, their lives continue as before, ‘not committed in advance to any group norms which might have awkward social implications’.⁸⁶

Paul is aware that it would be impossible to withdraw from the world altogether (1 Cor 5:9-10). Indeed, he cites his own example of becoming ‘all things

⁸³ *New Testament*, p. 18.

⁸⁴ *New Testament*, p. 16.

⁸⁵ ‘Social Contrasts’, pp. 68-69.

⁸⁶ Barclay, ‘Social Contrasts’, p. 70.

to all people, that I might by all means save some' (1 Cor 9:22, NRSV). Nevertheless, Barclay concludes that 'in the Corinthians' easy dealings with the world Paul detects a failure to comprehend the counter-cultural impact of the message of the cross'.⁸⁷

while the Jews demand miracles and the Greeks look for wisdom here are we preaching a crucified Christ; to the Jews an obstacle that they cannot get over, to the pagans madness, but to those who have been called, whether they are Jews or Greeks, a Christ who is the power and the wisdom of God.⁸⁸

Horsley interprets Paul's missionary work in the context of Roman imperial power, and presents the foundation of Christian churches as an 'assembly of saints ...to constitute a community of a new society alternative to the dominant imperial society'.⁸⁹ Understood in this way, the controversy about food sacrificed to idols (i.e. food eaten in the Roman temple⁹⁰) has social and political significance which reaches far beyond the individual ethical level. Participation in the temple dinners is out for Christians, not because the gods who are honoured are real, but because such rites are integral to the culture of the Empire. Christians are to 'flee from the worship of idols' (1 Cor 10:14) because they reject the entire system which it represents.

Barclay contrasts the Corinthians' style of faith, and of social relations with non-Christians, with those of the Thessalonians. The latter clearly heard the message of Paul as a call to turn from idols (1 Thess 1:9) and to live holy (4:1-3) and blameless (3:13) lives, as they await the coming of the *parousia* (1:10; 5:9) which they assume to imminent. Paul reassures them that the passing of some of their members alters nothing (4:15-17) – they are all God's elect (1:4). As Barclay

⁸⁷ 'Social Contrasts', p.59.

⁸⁸ 1 Cor 1:22-24.

⁸⁹ '1 Corinthians', p.244

⁹⁰ See Horsley, '1 Corinthians', p. 247.

observes:

The atmosphere created by this message is heavy with apocalyptic excitement. The standard dualisms of Jewish apocalyptic – between heaven and earth, the present and the future, the elect and the lost – are all present here and given sharp focus through the death and resurrection of Jesus.⁹¹

Paul and his converts meet serious opposition in Thessalonica with its emphasis on the cult of the Emperor (1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 1:4), but this they understand as at once consequence of and an incentive for their allegiance to Christ. It is likely that the root cause of the ‘persecutions and troubles’ experienced by the Thessalonians was their ‘refusal to take part in, or to consider as valid, the worship of any God but their own’.⁹² The possible correlation between the structures of their beliefs and the social alienation that they experienced are explored by Barclay. He points out that, while there is always the possibility of further conversions into the Christian community, here ‘apocalyptic symbols and social dislocation maintain and re-enforce each other’.⁹³

The question remains: what construction does Paul put on the mission of the Thessalonians, of whom he so obviously approves highly, in their social world? Paul advises:

...go on making even greater progress and to make a point of living quietly, attending to you own business and earning your living, just we told you to do, so that you are seen to be respectable by those outside the Church, though you do not have to depend on them. (1 Thess: 11-12).

The contrast between the Corinthian and Thessalonian churches is evident. Barclay dismisses the possibility that Paul is responsible for the differences, but rather concludes that social status and social interaction are key factors in the development

⁹¹ ‘Social Contrasts’, p. 51.

⁹² ‘Social Contrasts’, p. 53.

⁹³ ‘Social contrasts’, p. 55.

of particular Christian communities. His study also points out the diversity, already referred to, even between Pauline communities. The contrasting responses of the communities to their social environments illustrates the scope of the inculturation debate which will be pursued in chapter 6.

4.4.3 The Body of Christ and the Lord's Supper

Beker suggests that the ecclesiology of the Corinthians 'operated with a radical dualism between the sacred and the secular and was committed to an individualistic anthropology which looks at individuals as spiritualized selves-in-isolation.'⁹⁴ He sees the Corinthians as missing the mark not only on the Christian call to engage in a mission to its social world, but also on the communal nature of the church. To them, more than to any other community, Paul insists that they are still 'in the body'.⁹⁵ The implications of this reality for distinguishing between present giftedness and future promise have already been drawn out. Moreover, for him the implication of this claim is that 'the physical presence [of Christians] in the world is intended to produce the same effect as that of Christ'.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ *New Testament*, p.18.

⁹⁵ Paul's understanding of the body informs his teaching on sexual morality at three levels, each of which also illuminates his vision of the Church. He decries the false liberty through which some Corinthians were assuming that a sexual transgression such as incest, so glaringly wrong to Jews and Greeks, was of no moral significance. (1 Cor 5:5). In the context of his contention with this exaggerated spiritualism, Paul is 'concerned to convince them that body, [i.e. concrete being-in-the-world] is the sphere in which commitment to Christ becomes real'. (J. Murphy O'Connor, *1 Corinthians*, , Dublin: Veritas, 1979, p. 112. p.39). Secondly, the imaging of the Church as a body highlights that sexual immorality compromises not only the individual but also the community. Paul emphasizes the obligation of *the community* to excommunicate the perpetrator of incest not, as Murphy O'Connor observes, as a punishment, but as a remedy. (11 Corinthians, p.43.) Finally, Paul challenges the Corinthian attitude to fornication, i.e. that physical, bodily realities are of no moral significance (1 Cor 6:13), by his two 'do you know' statements: 'do you know that your bodies are members of Christ?' (6:15), and 'do you know that your (plural) body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you (plural)?' (6:19) In the light of verse 15, Murphy O'Connor argues that 'body' in verse 19 is singular, in which case, he claims the reference would be to the body of Christ. (p.54.)

⁹⁶ Murphy O'Connor, *1 Corinthians*, , Dublin: Veritas, 1979, 54.

The metaphor of 'the body' is rich and multifaceted for Paul as he uses it to describe the church in 1 Cor 12:12. Moreover, in its corporate being the church is described by Paul as 'the body of Christ' (3:16; 6:13-20; 9:27; 12:12-28), but Barrett points out that Paul implies here comparison rather than identity.⁹⁷ The church is likened to a body (a classical comparison) in that it is one entity with many members, and members who are interdependent, who are all shamed if one behaves dishonourably and who share a common destiny. To pursue individual (even spiritual) gifts in a way which disrupts community is thus not acceptable. Diverse gifts and capacities are to be respected and used for the sake of the whole, and are to be governed by the law of love; otherwise they will be rendered useless (1 Cor 13:1-3). The relation of the church, even as the body of Christ, to Christ himself is not made explicit by Paul at this point. What does, however, lift the use of 'body' beyond the metaphorical is Paul's insistence that in baptism the Spirit unites the members to the body which is the church (12:13). This Spirit is unmistakably, in the context, the Holy Spirit who leads believers to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord. (12:3) and who is the source of the gifts of the community (12:7) It is this Spirit who links the members with one another and with Christ.

The significance of the Eucharist is central to Paul's teaching on the Body of Christ in Corinthians. Because they share one bread, they are one body (10:17), and because they partake of the body and blood of the Lord (10:16) Christians must not partake of the 'table of demons' (10:21, NRSV).⁹⁸ There is an organic link between the body of Christ that is the community, the body of Christ that is the Eucharist, and the lived reality of their lives.

⁹⁷ *Paul, Introduction* p. 122.

⁹⁸ Horsley notes that for Paul, the most immediate casualties of God's plan are the 'rulers of this age' (1 Cor 2:6-8), namely the earthly political elite, with 'no real linguistic evidence indicating demonic powers'. '1 Corinthians' p. 244 and n.3.

Paul's response to accounts which he has received of the Lord's Supper at Corinth highlight his teaching on the communal nature of the church. Some members are clearly dishonouring themselves through their bodily behaviour in the gatherings (11:21). In this way they are also disrupting the body of the Church, through their disregard for others (11:22). Paul admonishes them, not only on these two counts, but also by pointing out that all who indulge in such conduct, failing to understand the implications of their actions, are behaving unworthily towards ('will be answerable for' 11:27 NRSV) the body of Christ. Murphy O'Connor claims that the 'discernment' of the body which is required is 'the affirmation in action of the organic unity of the community'.⁹⁹

It is the Pauline writers of the Colossians and Ephesians who, later, see Christ as the head of his body the Church in the sense which moves towards identity of the church as the Body of Christ with Christ himself, and thus gives rise to the Mystical Body ecclesiology (Col 1:18, Eph. 1:22). Those whom he has saved from the death of sinfulness have been 'made ... alive together with Christ' – that is with Christ who is risen from the dead (Eph 2:5-9). Here, Christ as head becomes the channel of all life and growth, of the building up of the body (Eph 4:16). Now the church, filled with the Spirit, can praise God 'in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Eph 5:20)

The contingent situation at Corinth occasions Paul's account of the Last Supper. Murphy O'Connor clarifies that Paul truly believes that he has received 'from the Lord' (11:23) that which has been handed on to him through the tradition. The eucharistic formula used by Paul 'betrays the characteristic signs of liturgical usage in a Greek-speaking community'.¹⁰⁰ He observes that:

It has been plausibly suggested that it records the usage of the church of Antioch which was the base to which Paul returned after each of

⁹⁹ *1 Corinthians*, p. 114.

¹⁰⁰ *1 Corinthians*, p. 112.

his missionary journeys'.¹⁰¹

For Paul, past present and future are integral to the act of remembrance: 'As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes'(11:26 NRSV). Paul emphasizes to the Corinthians that remembrance of the past is, in their case as the church of Christ, only meaningful if their present living involves death to the evils of their age, and if they look for their fulfillment to the future coming of the Lord.

Barrett suggests that the close connection between the Last Supper and the Lord's Supper may have been Paul's work. That the weekly assembly of Christians, taking place on the day of the Lord's resurrection, should take up the command of Jesus which he gave in the context of the (annually celebrated) Passover of the Jews was perhaps remarkable. However, to the Corinthians Paul is certainly saying: if at your supper you recall that event, you will no longer fall into your present errors.¹⁰² This community of Christians will avoid gatherings which are mere platforms for exhibitionism, over-emphasis on exalted 'spiritual' experience, fracturing of the community, or misguided detachment from the world, through the emphasis on their dignity as members of the Body of Christ, their communion in and with Christ who died and was raised, and undertaking of their mission in the world, which are all celebrated and fostered in the Eucharist.

4.4.4 Church, Creation and Kingdom

In the preceding section the emphasis which Paul placed on the futurist dimension of the Christian community's life and practice was evident. Being constituted as an alternative society through the death and resurrection of Jesus, as Horsley presents

¹⁰¹ *1 Corinthians*, p.112.

¹⁰² C.K.Barrett, *Paul, Introduction*, p.129.

them, does not remove Christians from the present, but does call them to look ahead to the fulfillment of what is now theirs in germ. While the Corinthians' reluctance to entertain the idea of the resurrection of the body occasioned Paul's insistence on the Church as 'first fruits', in Romans the futurist and universal dimensions of his apostolic mandate is more fully developed. There God's faithfulness is represented as the basis, the sustenance and the goal of the salvation of humankind. This faithfulness, which 'moves towards an apocalyptic horizon',¹⁰³ is revealed in Romans as having cosmic dimensions: '... creation still retains the hope of being freed, like us, from its slavery to decadence, to enjoy the same freedom and glory of the children of God' (8:21).

All believers, Jews and Greeks, stand in need of God's saving grace. (3:9; 3:22) It is God's righteousness, 'without works which are prescribed by the Law' (3:28), which is the source of this grace; hence all are equally indebted and blessed. Former distinctions are now meaningless; Paul, the prophetic preacher makes this clear, and thereby promotes the unity of the community: 'There will be ... glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality' (2: 9-11 NRSV).

The power of sin, which has to be overcome within the community of the church, is also at work in the world. Christians will experience struggle and suffering in the world, but the gift of the Spirit gives reason for hope. The church is sign and means of the coming into glory of all creation and of all humanity (8:21-23). Beker distinguishes between the 'prophetic' element in Paul's ecclesiology which emphasises the church as witness to Christ in the present, and its 'apocalyptic' dimension which signals the future realisation of the reign of God. Yet, he claims

¹⁰³ *The New Testament*, p. 37.

that 'Paul's prophetic and apocalyptic conceptualities supplement each other'.¹⁰⁴

Paul indicates in Romans that the Spirit is the dynamic force at work in the believing Church, holding out hope and motivating the community to live according to the gospel. While he is emphatic that faith (and not the law or the works) is the means of salvation, since it is our response of total dependence on God's grace, he guards against a static interpretation of being saved. It is the Spirit who 'pushes the believer into the future horizon of God's coming glory' [because] it conveys *the dynamic character* ... [and] it denotes the *ethical dimension* of the Christian life.¹⁰⁵ According to Paul, as they live in time and place Christians must do so in a manner which accords with their acceptance of the message of Christ, who died and rose again. Their belief and hope is that they are a sign and means of the victory of Christ in the world which is still to be transformed.

Having traced important themes in the emerging ecclesiology of Paul, I will now explore the writings of some of the earliest of the Christian Fathers. The influence of Paul varies with individual and circumstances, but does show, as will be evident.

4.5 THE CHURCH IN THE WRITINGS OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN FATHERS

In his introduction to *Early Christian Writings, the Apostolic Fathers*,¹⁰⁶ Andrew Louth points out that the discovery of authentic early writings (in addition to the scriptural texts) from the late sixteenth century onwards provided important information on the early days of the Christian church. They do not, he emphasises, offer a window on an embryonic system of belief that would, in time, come to full

¹⁰⁴ *The New Testament*, p. 39.

¹⁰⁵ *The New Testament*, p. 40.

¹⁰⁶ Maxwell Staniforth and Andrew Louth, *Early Christian Writings, the Apostolic Fathers [Early Christian Writings]*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1987, p. 10

term and be preserved within the structures of apostolic succession.¹⁰⁷ Rather, he claims the writings must be approached against the background of their own context, with the typical religious concerns of Jews and Christians of the period. Approached in this way,

...the Apostolic Fathers display an understanding of the Christian faith ... that is not just a tantalizingly allusive and incomplete version of the faith of the Church of the Ecumenical Councils but a rich and powerful articulation of the Christian faith itself.¹⁰⁸

Similarly, all the patristic writings must be read in context, especially where this is marked by a struggle between competing understandings, for example, of God, Jesus, salvation and church, and where 'orthodoxy' was not always a given.

From the earliest days, beginning in the New Testament and contemporary writings, the emergence of structures to preserve the unity of belief and practice has been observed. This process continued during the first centuries. Thus 'rich and powerful' self-understanding is carried on a framework of organization, which is essential but which sometimes also threatens the charismatic elements of the communities. I will first explore the evolution of institutional structure within the writings of the early Church Fathers, and also highlight the need for constant critical review. I will then trace the theme of church as community in these same sources, which will lead to a discussion of the centrality of the Eucharist in the early communities as represented by some of the Fathers, as well as the related understanding of the church as the Body of Christ.

4.5.1 The Emergence of Institutional Structures of Church

I Clement demonstrates a view of the church as the fruit of the apostolic preaching

¹⁰⁷ *Early Christian Writings*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁸ *Early Christian Writings*, p. 11.

and ministry. For Clement the church is founded everywhere that the Apostles preached and ministered:

Now, the Gospel was given to the Apostles for us by the Lord Jesus Christ; and Jesus Christ was sent from God. That is to say, Christ received His commission from God, and the Apostles theirs from Christ. The order of these two events was in accordance with the will of God. So thereafter, when the Apostles had been given their instructions, and all their doubts had been set at rest by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, they set out in the full assurance of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the coming of God's kingdom. And as they went through the territories and townships preaching, they appointed their first converts – after testing them by the Spirit – to be bishops and deacons for the believers of the future.¹⁰⁹

In Clement's view, the ministry takes place in an orderly manner which reflects the process whereby Christ is from God, the Apostles from Christ. Yet, as Louth observes, 'the position of the bishop within this ministry lacks the clarity it assumes in later Christian tradition'.¹¹⁰

Ignatius of Antioch, by contrast, places the bishop in a pivotal position in the organisation and life of the church. However, the concept of apostolic succession in relation to the bishop scarcely features in his letters.¹¹¹ Rather, Ignatius suggests that the bishop is, analogously, representative of God, and that the church, served by presbyters and deacons, relates to the bishop as Jesus to the Father:

... let me urge on you the need for godly unanimity in everything you do. Let the bishop preside in the place of God, and his clergy in place of the Apostolic conclave, and let my special friends the deacons be entrusted with the service of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father from all eternity and in these last days has been made manifest.¹¹²

Ignatius *defines* church in terms of the offices of bishop, presbyters and deacons:

... it is for the rest of you to hold the deacons in as great respect as Jesus Christ; just as you should also look on the bishop as a type of

¹⁰⁹ *The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians [1 Clement]*, in *Early Christian Writings*, p. 41

¹¹⁰ *Early Christian Writings*, p. 21.

¹¹¹ See Louth, *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 57.

¹¹² Magn 6, *Early Christian Writings*, p. 72.

the Father, and the clergy as the Apostolic circle forming his council; for without these three orders no church has any right to the name..¹¹³

As the Word comes forth from the Father, who maintains eternal silence, so the church may be said to ‘come forth’ from the bishop (who is to be revered all the more in his silence) and to serve in its activity the mystery of divine presence:¹¹⁴

All of you together, as though you were approaching the only existing temple of God and the only altar, speed to the one and only Jesus Christ – who came down from the one and only Father, is eternally with that One, and to that One is now returned.¹¹⁵

Chadwick rejects the practical interpretation that a particular bishop (Onesimus of Ephesus) was simply taciturn, on the grounds that Ignatius’ argument is deeper and more universal in application. In Ignatius’ view, the bishop is ‘the earthly representative of God’.¹¹⁶ The possible elliptical tension between this particular ecclesiological view of the bishop’s symbolic role, on the one hand, and his administrative functions in the context of ecclesial praxis, on the other, is evident.

Irenaeus of Lyons also emphasises the structural link of the church to the apostles. Faced as he was with the challenge of gnosticism he writes:

This is true Gnosis: the teaching of the apostles, and the ancient institution of the church, spread throughout the entire world, and the distinctive mark of the body of Christ in accordance with the successions of bishops, to whom the apostles entrusted each local church, and the unfeigned preservation, coming down to us, of the scriptures, with a complete collection allowing for neither addition nor subtraction; a reading without falsification and, in conformity with the scriptures, an interpretation that is legitimate, careful, without danger or blasphemy.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Trall 3, *Early Christian Writings*, p. 79.

¹¹⁴ Henry Chadwick ‘The Silence of the Bishop’, *Harvard Theological Review* (1950), pp. 169-172.

¹¹⁵ Magn 7, 2, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 95.

¹¹⁶ ‘The Silence of the Bishop’, p. 170.

¹¹⁷ *Against Heresies*, Book IV, 33.8, in Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 161.

Irenaeus identifies Peter *and* Paul (it is important that Paul is incorporated into the 'apostolic college' so that the unity of the church is demonstrated) as the founding fathers of the church at Rome, and claims for that church a position of leadership and authority.¹¹⁸ The church 'having received this preaching and this faith... though dispersed in the whole world, diligently guards [the preaching and faith of the apostles] as living in one house, believes them as having one soul and one heart (Acts 4:32) and consistently preaches, teaches, and hands them down as having one mouth'.¹¹⁹ The mission of the church in the world is, according to Irenaeus, to make manifest the tradition of the apostles.

The organisation of the church as a visible society with hierarchical orders was defended by Tertullian as an apologetic theologian, in his strong refutation of gnosticism, the Marcionites, Valentinians and others. Eric Osborn observes that Tertullian derives his view of the church from Paul and Matthew.¹²⁰ However, his rigorously ascetic attitudes led him to require a church of the perfect. Hence, those guilty of grave sin ought to be, according to Tertullian, permanently excluded. The power of ordained ministers, and even of the bishop, to forgive was thus relativised. However, despite the conflict with church authority into which his Montanism eventually led him, Tertullian did not deny the essential apostolicity of the church.

Cyprian of Carthage is in no doubt regarding the significance of the hierarchical authority, both symbolically and juridically, in the church. The church he conceives as the bishop, the clergy and all the faithful in a unity which is essential, and which is symbolized by the bishop:

... you ought to know that the bishop is in the church and the church is in the bishop and if anyone be not with the bishop, that he is not in

¹¹⁸ See *Against Heresies*, Book III, 1.1, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, p.124.

¹¹⁹ *Against Heresies*, Book I, 10.2, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, p. 71.

¹²⁰ *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p.177.

the church.¹²¹

Holding ardently to the unity of the church, and the unity of the episcopacy throughout the church he invokes the Pauline tradition:

...the blessed Apostle Paul ... sets forth the sacrament of unity saying, "There is one body and one spirit, one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God (Eph 4:4).¹²²

According to Cyprian the church's unity mirrors the unity of God: God is one and Christ is one, and his church is one ...¹²³

Thus the need to preserve an organic and unifying link to the apostles leads the early Fathers to an institutional structure centred on the bishop. While this structure is understood theologically by the Pauline writers and by the Fathers, it is important to recognise that civic institutions of the Graeco-Roman cities provided the growing church with an organisational pattern:

The Pauline churches were civic churches, each a nucleus within an established city. Just as the city had its single magistrate, so the local church had its single 'overseer' or bishop (*episcopos*). When the need for consultation between churches arose, this followed the pattern of the Roman provincial councils: the churches were duly represented in their provincial assemblies and other councils by the bishops of the single cities.¹²⁴

Sherwin-White outlines the relationship of citizenship of the Roman state to the membership of the local community of the city. While all belonged to 'a unified system which had Rome as its head' this generally contributed little to the life of provinces whose culture was rooted in Hellenism, except in the area of civil law and jurisprudence:

...the intellectual climate of the east in the first and second centuries AD included not only Greek rhetoric and Greek philosophy, but Roman jurisprudence with its notions of legal contract and casuistry.

¹²¹ *Epistle*, LXVIII,7. *ANF*, Vol. 5, p.375.

¹²² *On the Unity of the Church*, 4, *ANF*, Vol. 5, p. 422.

¹²³ *On the Unity of the Church*, 23, *ANF*, Vol 5, p.429

¹²⁴ See Adrian Sherwin-White, 'The Roman Background of Early Christianity' ['Roman Background'], in *Concilium* 3 (7), (1967), pp. 5-9.

This reinforced the example set by the pattern of civic and provincial government, and encouraged an organization of church life based on regulation and legal discipline.¹²⁵

Thus, the institution of the church can be said to have evolved through the need of the communities for identity, organization and leadership, with a theological justification centred on the bishop as the representative of God (Ignatius) or as successor of the apostles, and influenced by the existing juridical patterns within the Roman Empire.

4.5.2 The Need for On-going Critical Review of Structures

Within the hierarchical structure of the church, on which the enduring edifice was being built throughout the second century, the role of ordained men was emphasized, arguably in a manner that played down the equality and inclusiveness that was clearly reflected in the work of Paul, and especially in his early letters. The scheme of bishop, priest and deacon did not arise at the same time everywhere, yet by the year 200 (if not earlier) it was becoming established throughout the whole Christian community. The roles of prophet and teacher evident in Pauline letters and in the *Didache*,¹²⁶ do not receive mention after that, even in Clement and Ignatius of Antioch. Moreover, by limiting the leadership roles to the ordained ministry, already reserved to men, women are excluded. This is in contrast with the house churches and mission of the early Christian movement. Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians provide evidence of communities in which there is 'no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all ...

¹²⁵ 'Roman Background', p.8. Sherwin-White continues: 'Hence ultimately the development of a complex 'canon' law, and the notably institutional pattern of church life and social discipline.' p. 8.

¹²⁶ e.g. *Didache* 15: 'You must chose for yourselves bishops and deacons who are worthy of the Lord ...they take an honourable rank among you along with the prophets and teachers'. *Early Christian Writings*, p. 197. Louth acknowledges the controversy surrounding the *Didache*, but decides in favour of a mid- to late-first century origin. *Early Christian Writings*, p.189.

are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28). And, as Deborah Sawyer observes, theological insights are matched by clues to the social ranks and occupations of the individuals mentioned by name, particularly in the greetings sections of these epistles.¹²⁷ Particular references are to be found, for example, to Phoebe, a deacon (Rom 16:1-2), the couple Prisca and Aquila, co-workers with Paul (Rom 16:3), and Junia who was 'prominent among the apostles' (Rom 16:7). Sawyer observes the tension between the egalitarian quality of the early communities and the emergence of hierarchical structures, which was becoming evident, even within the period of the New Testament:

On the one hand there was a continuation of eschatological zeal from the Jesus movement, based on the liberating experience of the free spirit; whilst on the other hand, a theological argument and practice began to emerge restoring women to the status of the second sex.¹²⁸

The so-called 'household codes' of Colossians and 1 Peter, which endorse a patriarchal order in the Christian household are accompanied by the introduction of similar hierarchies into the community of the church and its ministry. Sawyer posits varying circumstances, e.g. the threat of persecution, and the influence of local pagan shrines, as influencing this development. In summary she notes:

Women's role diminished with the rise of orthodoxy, and teaching on women outlined in the Pastorals and the household codes became normative. Those are the texts constantly quoted by the church fathers from the second century on, while those that offer alternative options for women are rarely discussed.¹²⁹

It was not only the role of women which was being consigned to secondary status in the church with the emergence of hierarchical structures. All non-ordained (lay) believers were also progressively written out of the power structures, even while a

¹²⁷ *Women and Religion in the First Christian Centuries [Women and Religion]*, London: Routledge, 1996, p.101.

¹²⁸ *Women and Religion*, p. 106.

¹²⁹ *Women and Religion*, p. 115.

strong theme of community was developing, as will be seen below. A critical question is: Why do ordained ministerial roles become so closely linked with functions of authority within the community of the church?

The influence on the developing church structure of the political and legal systems which were in place in the civic society of the Empire in the early centuries of the Christian church has been discussed. Thus, historical analysis suggests a degree of syncretism on the part of the church which requires critique from the theological perspectives which are available within the earliest tradition. Having indicated one area where critique is currently pursued, I will now pursue further my exploration of the theology of church in the early Fathers.

4.5.3 The Church as Community in the Early Christian Fathers

While the evolution of structure is a feature of the church in the first centuries, this did not preclude an emphasis within the theology of that period on the church as the community of all believers. The unity of the whole community is called for by *I Clement* by contrast with the strife which is rampant among the Corinthians. Having instanced the co-operation which is required, for example, in the military, or again in the physical organism which is the body, he appeals to them: 'In Christ Jesus, then, let this corporate body of ours be likewise maintained intact'.¹³⁰ The theological justification for this call for harmony is:

Have we not all the same God and the same Christ? Is not the same Spirit of Grace shed upon us all? Have we not all the same calling in Christ?¹³¹

Likewise, the letters of Ignatius abound in praise and prayers for the unity of the communities:

¹³⁰ *I Clement*, 38, *Early Christian Writings*, p. 38.

¹³¹ *I Clement*, 46, *Early Christian Writings*, p. 42.

I sing songs of praise to the churches; and I pray for their corporate as well as their spiritual unity – for both of these are the gifts of Jesus Christ ... May they be one in their faith, and one in the love which transcends all other virtues; but chiefest of all may they be one with Jesus and the Father...¹³²

The theme recurs, echoing of course the letters of Paul and others of the New Testament, and indeed, the gospels notably that of John. Later it will be seen that Cyprian's treatise on the unity of the Church proved to be important in the struggles against the Donatists.

The author of *I Clement* indicates the desirability of an active involvement of the whole church as a community (at least at the level of consent) in the appointment of those who would minister to 'Christ's flock'.¹³³ The teachings of Clement on the engagement of the community in the selection of its leaders are echoed by Ignatius when, writing to Polycarp (bishop of Smyrna in Asia Minor) he recommends a corporate process to appoint a missionary to Syria:

... it would be eminently fitting if you were to summon the reverend members of your council and choose some generally approved person, known for his enterprise, who could be appointed as a courier for God. Commission this man to glorify God and add luster to your own unwearied affection by making the journey to Syria.¹³⁴

Among the writings of Cyprian, also, there are passages that echo those of *I Clement* and Ignatius, on the participation of the faithful in the processes of selecting and commissioning those who will, by being ordained, take a special role in leading the church. He describes 'the practice delivered from divine tradition and apostolic observance, which is also maintained among us, and almost throughout all the provinces; that ... the bishop should be chosen in the presence of the people, who

¹³² *Magn. 1, Early Christian Writings*, p. 71.

¹³³ *I Clement*, 44, *Early Christian Writings*, p.41.

¹³⁴ *Polycarp 7, Early Christian Writings*, p.111. Of crucial importance is Holmes observation that the 'you' and 'your' in this citation are plural in the original Greek, *Apostolic Fathers* p.117, n.130.

have most fully known the life of each one...'.¹³⁵ He then refers to 'the suffrage of the whole brotherhood, and ... the sentence of the bishops who had assembled',¹³⁶ which suggests that the people's role was limited to the ratification of the choice made by the bishops. Cyprian noted that the apostles observed similar procedures in the selection of bishops, priests *and* deacons.¹³⁷

The formal role of the ordained ministry within the community of the church is strongly upheld in the theology of the early Fathers. However, the dignity and the mission of all the baptised is also a recurring theme. Since for Tertullian the church is primarily the church of the Spirit, those members who are most fully 'spiritual' have the greatest power. He thus emphasises the membership of the laity in the community of the church:

Of giving [baptism] the chief priest (who is the bishop) has the right: in the next place, the presbyters and deacons, yet not without the bishop's authority, on account of the honour of the Church, which is being preserved, peace is preserved. Besides these, even laymen have the right; for what is equally received can be equally given.¹³⁸

Osborn observes of Montanism, already two generations old before Tertullian embraced it, as possibly 'a negative response to the increased organisation of the church catholic', which in turn, he suggests was 'partly a response to the challenge of Gnosticism'.¹³⁹

The church is also seen mainly in its spiritual reality in the doctrine of Origen, who opposes to gnostic theology, in the view of Henry Chadwick, 'a coherent and self-consistent view of Christian doctrine'.¹⁴⁰ His vision of the Church

¹³⁵ *Epistle LXVII, 5, ANF, Vol.5, p. 371.*

¹³⁶ *Epistle LXVII.5. ANF, Vol. 5, p. 371*

¹³⁷ *Epistle LXVII, 4, ANF, vol.5, p. 370.*

¹³⁸ *On Baptism, Chap. XVII, ANF, vol. 3, p. 677.*

¹³⁹ *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West, p. 177*

¹⁴⁰ *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition, Studies in Justin, Clement and Origen [Early Christian Thought], Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966, p. 72. Nevertheless, Chadwick observes of *De Principiis* that it is exploratory rather than dogmatic. p. 72.*

embraces past and future, as well as present. Crouzel observes: 'In Origen's view the history of the Church is co-extensive with that of the rational beings'.¹⁴¹ In his doctrine, therefore, he echoes the theme of *kenosis* of Christ as the God-man who chose to leave the Father for the sake of the church, clearly to be understood corporately, so that the church could ultimately regain its pre-existent glory. Origen's theology resonates to imagery of the Pauline writer of Ephesians: 'This mystery is great. But I am speaking in respect of Christ and the Church'.¹⁴² While, as Crouzel observes, Origen has an 'acute sense of the essential dimension of the time of the church here below, which we call sacramentalism',¹⁴³ his vision of priesthood within the church community is multi-faceted:

Christ's priesthood, the common priesthood of his body the Church, whence the priesthood of believers, the visible ministerial priesthood of the Church, the invisible priesthood of perfection, the heavenly priesthood of Christ and his angels.¹⁴⁴

By emphasizing the priesthood of the baptized, Origen clearly desires to balance any tendency to limit the saving action of God to the prescriptions of institutional authority.¹⁴⁵

The understanding of the church as community is thus woven into the theology of the early Fathers, even as that theology validates the structuring of church into set patterns of ministry, of organization, and of authority. This understanding of the Christian church as essentially communal is ritualized in the celebration of the Eucharist and crystallized in the theology of the church as the Body of Christ. It is to these themes that I will address the final part of this

¹⁴¹ Henri Crouzel, *Origen*, Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1989, p.227.

¹⁴² Eph 5:32.

¹⁴³ *Origen*, p.220.

¹⁴⁴ Crouzel, *Origen*, p.223.

¹⁴⁵ Chadwick discusses the 'perennial issue' of Origen's orthodoxy. His vast knowledge of the Greek philosophers, and his use of its resources in his teaching and disputation, may be seen by his critics as adulteration of the Christian message. But Chadwick acknowledges the illiberal ascetic who is

exploration of the early Fathers.

4.5.4 The Celebration of the Eucharist and the Church as the Body of Christ

Already in the New Testament the gathering together of the community of believers in fellowship, in prayer, and in remembrance of the Lord's Supper has been represented as central to their self-understanding and life. Assuming a first century origin for the *Didache*,¹⁴⁶ an early form of Eucharistic Prayer may even have been preserved.¹⁴⁷ *1 Clement* also places a strong emphasis on the Christian assembly: '...gathered together in a conscious unity [we ought] to cry to Him as it were with a single voice, if we are to obtain a share of His glorious great promises'.¹⁴⁸ The letters of Ignatius provide insights into the manner of the gathering and the ritual of the early second century. To the Ephesians he writes: 'Do your best ...to meet more often to give thanks and glory to God.... Nothing can better a state of peaceful accord, from which every trace of spiritual or earthly hostility has been banished'.¹⁴⁹ In his letter to the Philadelphians Ignatius indicates that the gathering is for Eucharist, and that everything is to be carried out in accordance with established order, as a source of unity::

Make certain...that you all observe one common Eucharist; for there is but one Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, and but one cup of union with His Blood, and one single altar of sacrifice – even as there is but one bishop, with his clergy and my own fellow-servitors the deacons. This will ensure that all your doings are in full accord with the will of God.¹⁵⁰

The gradual movement into one Eucharistic ritual of the love-feast *agape* which (cf.

passionately engaged with the search for truth in the light of the gospel, and is deeply committed to the church, and forces the prior question: what is orthodoxy? *Early Christian Thought*, pp.95-123.

¹⁴⁶ See note 129 above.

¹⁴⁷ See *Early Christian Writings*, pp. 194-195.

¹⁴⁸ *1 Clement*, 34, *Early Christian Writings*, pp. 36-37.

¹⁴⁹ *Ephesians* 13, *Early Christian Writings*, p. 64.

¹⁵⁰ *Philadelphians* 4, *Early Christian Writings*, p. 94.

Corinthian gatherings) would seem in earliest days to have preceded it, is indicated in Ignatius' letter to the Smyrnaeans:

The sole Eucharist you should consider valid is one that is celebrated by the bishop himself, or by some person authorized by him. Where the bishop is seen, there let all his people be; just as wherever Jesus Christ is present, we have the catholic Church. Nor is it permissible to conduct baptisms or love-feasts without the bishop.¹⁵¹

The description by Justin Martyr (c.150) of the order of service obviously represents common practices of the time which have had enduring quality.¹⁵² He follows his description of the ritual with an exposition of the faith of the church that in the Eucharist the community is united with Christ and in what took place at the Last Supper. He also spells out the commitment of the community members to one another, and to others 'strangers,' following the celebration, and justifies the marking of Sunday as the day on which the gathering, the scripture reading and the Eucharistic liturgy are celebrated.

The strong links between the Eucharistic celebration, which was clearly integral to the very identity as well as to the life of the early communities, and their sense of corporateness by virtue of their union with Christ, which is clearly presented in these early Fathers, was already evident in the New Testament and especially in Paul's teaching to his communities. In his dealing with the Corinthians, as I have explored above, Paul uses the reality of bodily resurrection to counter their overly spiritual enthusiasm and to call them to responsible and worthy behaviour in the community – especially as the community which gathers to celebrate the Lord's

¹⁵¹ *Smyrnaeans*, 8, *Early Christian Writings*, p.103.

¹⁵² Following a ritual of reconciling and inclusion (of newly baptized, perhaps), and assent to the teaching of the church, prayers are offered for all the baptized and all others in every place. Following this there is the sign of peace. Bread and wine (mixed with water) are brought to the president of the assembly, who offers 'prayers and thanksgivings' to which all present express their assent by saying Amen. The deacons then: 'give to each of those present to partake of the bread and wine mixed with water over which the thanksgiving was pronounced, and to those who are absent they carry away a portion'. *The First Apology of Justin* chap. LXV, *ANF*, Vol 1, p.185.

Supper. Irenaeus echoes Paul strongly when he argues (against the dualistic philosophies of the Gnostics):

Those who reject the whole 'economy' of God, deny the salvation of the flesh and reject its regeneration, ... are absolutely vain. If this flesh is not saved, the Lord did not redeem us by his blood (Col. 1:14) and the cup of the Eucharist is not communion with his blood and the bread we break is not communion with his body (1 Cor. 10:16). ... And because we are his members (1 Cor. 6:15) and are nourished by means of the creation, he ... declared that the cup from the creation is his blood, out of which he makes our blood increase, and the bread from the creation is his body, out of which he makes our body grow...¹⁵³

Thus, Irenaeus argues that the resurrection of the body has very significant implications for our living 'in the flesh', and our membership of the Body of Christ that is nowhere more significant than in the celebration of the Eucharist.

Paul's vision of church as the Body of Christ is reflected also in Cyprian's concept of the church as all of the faithful, despite the juridical tone of Cyprian's ecclesiology.¹⁵⁴ Many of the Epistles of Cyprian are addressed 'to the presbyters and deacons, and to the whole people',¹⁵⁵ or even simply 'to the whole people'.¹⁵⁶ In their Introductory Notice to Cyprian the editors of the *Ante Nicene Fathers* declare him the 'patron and defender of the presbytery and of lay co-operation, as well as of the regimen of the episcopate'.¹⁵⁷ And he goes on to say of Cyprian that: 'he is the most clear and comprehensive in his conception of the Body of Christ as an organic whole, in which every member has an honourable function'.¹⁵⁸

Cyprian's theology of church – his rigorous treatment of the lapsed on the one hand and his plea for unity on the other - was, ironically, invoked by both sides

¹⁵³ *Adversus Haereses*, V.2.2, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, p.164.

¹⁵⁴ See above p. 133.

¹⁵⁵ E.g. *Epistle XXXIV*, *ANF*, p.314.

¹⁵⁶ E.g. *Epistle XXXIX*, *ANF*, p.316.

¹⁵⁷ *ANF*, vol. 5, p.263.

¹⁵⁸ *ANF*, Vol. 5, p. 263.

of the Donatist controversy in the fourth century, and when Augustine became bishop of Carthage in 388 he faced the task of its resolution. Augustine called on Matthew's parables to demonstrate that, in the world, the church is a mixture of good and bad.¹⁵⁹ Thus repentant sinners are to be readmitted to the church, and their sacramental actions are not invalidated by their sin. At the same time he invoked Cyprian's emphasis on the unity of the church to call those in schism to reconciliation. In fact, the unity of Christians in one body with Christ as their head is a recurring theme in Augustine. While Augustine's theology of church merits an entirely separate study, outside the scope of this dissertation, he provides an appropriate end-point for the present overview:

When I speak of Christians in the plural, I understand one in the One Christ. Ye are therefore many; and ye are one; we are many, and we are one. How are we many, and yet one? Because we cling unto Him whose members we are; ... and all of us who cling unto the Body of Christ, and have been made members of Christ, walk in the ways of the Lord....¹⁶⁰

Clearly, there is in the accounts of the life and reflections of the Christian communities of the first centuries a rich theology of the Eucharist and a strong theme of church as Body of Christ, and this understanding is in continuity with the mind of the New Testament writers, notably Paul.

CONCLUSION

Having explored some key accounts of the earliest communities of those who believed in Christ, it is now possible to underpin the characteristics of Christian community which can inform practice, criticism and self-criticism, especially when our understanding of these characteristics has been enriched with the narratives and theological reflections which this study has required.

¹⁵⁹ See page 102 above.

4.6.1 Normative Characteristics of the Christian Community

From the earliest times (e.g. Acts 4:32) the church has been identified as a fellowship (*koinonia*), united in belief in and witness to (*martyria*) Christ (Acts 5:29), a praying community, engaging in worship (*leitourgia*) (Acts 4:23), and a community committed to service (*diakonia*) within its membership and in the social setting (Acts 6:5). I will now relate these characteristics to the study of the early church which I have attempted above.

(1) The reality of the church as a community or fellowship was emphasised by Paul, in particular through his use of the 'body' metaphor. It is also evident in the Johannine images of flock and vine, and the early Fathers do reflect Paul's concept of the church as the Body of Christ. The implications of this communal nature, for example in the context of the Corinthian church, have been discussed at some length. In the complementarity of gifts (1 Cor 12) the whole community is nourished, hierarchies are of secondary importance, and every member, weak or strong, rich or poor is valued. Thus a fellowship, a *koinonia* which is beyond both human wisdom and the inequalities of existing social structure (Gal 3:18), is the norm for the true Christian community and for the church.

(2) From the beginning the 'churches' or Christian communities were, by definition, associations of those who had received and believed the message of Jesus Christ. The accounts in Acts, for example, of the spread of the church, as well as the correspondence of the Fathers illustrated above, describe the preaching and teaching of the apostles and their co-workers. Throughout the early history of the church those who preached and taught relied largely for their authority on their *succession* to the first witnesses. Paul's 'apostolic' credentials were important both to himself and

¹⁶⁰ *Psalm 127, 2, NPNF, p. 609.*

converts (Gal 2).

Evidence of credal statements and liturgical formulations of core beliefs have been pointed out above (e.g. 1 Cor 15, 1 Cor 11). These were means of handing on what had been received (1 Cor 11). The emphasis in these formulations of the *life and death* of Jesus roots the message within the total human reality of those who receive it, and the centrality of the *resurrection* is a ground for hope. The importance of bodily, concrete being-in-the-world is evident in the outlines of the belief and practice of the communities of believers at Antioch and Corinth. What they hold as true they must demonstrate in their living – that the God of Jesus Christ is God of Jew and Greek, slave and free; is the God who saves, and who is to come again in glory, is not just one god among others. Where this witness led to persecution and death the apostles and many early Christians showed their convictions by martyrdom. Fidelity to the witness of the apostolic tradition is clearly a defining characteristic of the Christian church, and of each Christian community. This characteristic is signified by the term *martyria*.

(3) The central importance of the Eucharist as defining, correcting, and nourishing the early communities has been explored. In liturgical ritual the community remembers the death and resurrection of Jesus, partakes in that mystery in the present, ‘until he comes’. *Leitourgia* implies a context of shared faith and life in the church as the Body of Christ. The empirical reality of the church as a mixture of good and bad led to diverse responses among the Fathers. Augustine (in particular) built on Matthew’s parables and developed a theology of church as an imperfect agent of the coming kingdom of God. It is this church which gathers for Eucharist, which therefore celebrates its struggles as well as its pledge of victory. Liturgy, especially Eucharist, gives actualisation in an event in time and place to the

essential meaning of the church, in its present reality and in its potentiality. Moreover, it commits the assembly to renew itself as God's people.

(4) The Christian community is a historical and social reality, in a living context. The study of the churches of Antioch and Corinth illustrated this point. Allegiance to Christ is not a path to 'realized eschatology'. Rather, it is in response to the needs of the community that Christians express their love, without which all the other gifts are 'nothing at all' (1 Cor. 13). The call to service and to justice – *diakonia* - is integral to the Christian community's commission, is illustrated in the New Testament letters as well as the in the guidance of the Fathers to their people, as it was to the People of God throughout the Hebrew scriptures.

The dimensions of church as Christian community, *koinonia*, *martyria*, *leitourgia* and *diakonia*, evident in the life of the church from the earliest times, are undoubtedly inter-related. Taken together they provide a useful analytical and evaluative tool for church praxis in any age.

4.6.2 Summary and Points for Correlation between the Theology of the Early Communities and Present-day Praxis

The early Christian communities were founded on the experiences of the first disciples – of those who walked with the historical Jesus and of those who were witnesses to the earliest manifestations of the Spirit of the risen Christ. A major challenge was the interpretation of these events, i.e. their relation to the Jewish religion within which they arose (the faith of most of the first followers), their meaning in the light of the Hebrew Scriptures, and their revelatory significance for a gentile world. How the communities of believers were to understand themselves and their presence in their world was not a matter of immediate consent. What I have

traced in this chapter is the unfolding of central beliefs in the face of diverse views and circumstances, and a tradition which has continuity with the origins of the church. I have considered the impact of its socio-political and cultural contexts on the emerging self-understanding and structures of Christian communities. I have highlighted the diversity in interpretation by writers, from the New Testament times onwards, which has resulted from their varying cultural orientations (thought-patterns) and contexts.¹⁶¹ While the institution of the church as it has developed has certain strength, it is clear that it must continually be subjected to critical theological reflection, and elements from the earliest tradition which are threatened or lost must be continually retrieved in an on-going dialogue.

The chief points in the theology of church which have emerged in this chapter that can be correlated with aspects of life and mission today are (1) the polarities which are already evident in the early church's self-understanding and practice, (2) the importance of the church community's interactions with its social environment, (3) the centrality of Eucharist and (4) the eschatological dimension of the church's identity and mission.

(1) Four major polarities arise in theological consideration of the reality of the church in all ages. They have been evident in the exploration of the self-understanding and practice of the early communities which I have undertaken in this chapter. Firstly, the empirical reality of geographically isolated communities produced local churches throughout the entire Roman Empire. The relationship of these *local* churches to the one, *universal* church (not simply with the church of Rome) is a theological issue which endures, and a key question in the context of this dissertation. The theme of unity, very evident in the Fourth gospel, and upheld

¹⁶¹ In Chapter 6 the 'inculturation debate' will be resumed.

strongly by all the Apostolic Fathers as well as by Cyprian and Augustine, is a major challenge to theology from the East-West division in the eleventh century onwards, and in particular (within the western context) since the Reformation. It is an essential element in any exploration of an ecclesiology for today.

A second polarity which emerged as the church's self-understanding unfolded was that of *charism* and *institution*. Organisational structures were developed as the gospel encountered the diverse social settings of the Graeco-Roman world. Paul as the community organiser differed greatly from the mendicant preachers of the village culture of Palestine. The 'love-patriarchalism' which is enshrined in the accounts of the Community at Corinth was his solution to that particular social environment of that Church. It has been observed that hierarchical structures were developing within the first two centuries of the church's existence. These structures at once reveal and conceal the working of the Spirit, as instanced by the loss of the roles of prophet, leader and teacher, and the exclusion of women and non-ordained men from full participation in the life and leadership of the church. The tension between institution and charism is an important aspect of ecclesiology and will be highly relevant in my exploration of a theology of parish for today.

Already in the early church period the balancing of *continuity* and *change* was operating in the developing self-understanding and practice of the church. As it has existed in history, the church has always and of necessity accommodated itself to each age, through a process of adaptation. Fidelity to tradition is the first justification of evolution in response to new situations. Nevertheless, the resulting tension characterises church life in all ages. To this tension the fourth polarity is closely related: What is the relationship of the 'church' to the 'world', and in particular to the culture of its context? On the one hand, by its nature there is no

Christian message apart from the historical Christian community with its ways of thinking and living, and yet a too-complete identification with its cultural environment may obliterate what is to be characteristic of the Christian community which is the church.

(2) The relationship of church communities with their social environment, in relation to its task or mission, was under discussion from the earliest days. How ought the church, without losing its identity, relate to the world in order to witness to its belief? And how separate may church community be before it becomes ghettoized? At both Antioch and Corinth the prevailing circumstances within the society prior to the reception of the message of Christ is a significant factor in the development of the Christian community there. At Antioch, the high standing of the large Jewish colony gave rise to four different stances towards the new teaching, based on how its relationship with the tradition was interpreted. The playing-out of the relations between these groups engaged the apostolic leaders through at least the first two generations. While this was not the only, nor indeed the decisive factor in the development of the church at Antioch, it did offer a medium through which understanding of Christian principles and the self-understanding of the Christian community could evolve. At Corinth, the absence of long-standing traditions has been noted. Indeed, it has been argued that much of the difficulty that arose among the early Corinthian Christians can be traced, at least in part, to lack of a history and tradition. This situation also offered to Paul and others the opportunity to crystallise the principles of the Christian message in terms of the local setting. In all cases, the pre-Constantinian church was a minority religious grouping within the context of the Roman Empire. Discerning the mission of the church in particular, and very varied contexts, is an on-going challenge to ecclesiology and praxis, even in the parish

setting.

The sociological characteristics of the social setting carry over into the community of believers. The resources of the gospel message can be used by the Christian community to critique the patterns of life of the wider society. Thus, in Corinth, as we have seen, the equality and inclusiveness implicit in the Christian message as interpreted by Paul, challenge the ambition and selectivity that they encounter among the Corinthians. In turn the account of Christianity's origins in the village culture of Palestine had to be challenged and developed in order to be applicable in the urban centres of the Greco-Roman world. The inculturation debate endures and will feature later in the dissertation.

(3) The celebration of the Lord's Supper emerged as central to the life and mission of the early church, not without raising serious questions regarding membership and the self-understanding which was expressed in the rituals. The necessary relationship between the community's self-awareness as the Body of Christ in its living relationships and in its presence in the world, on the one hand, and the celebration of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, on the other, was evident in Paul's communication with the Corinthian Christians. The centrality of the Eucharist, as the most intensive actualisation of the Church as 'event', in Rahner's terminology, and in the ecclesiology of Vatican II will be seen in the next two chapters.

(4) The tensions of living 'between the times' continue in every age for Christians. The Christian church exists in a world redeemed and sinful. While the presence and power of the Spirit can be experienced in the church, the full realisation of the 'kingdom' of God is yet to come. The enthusiasm of the Corinthians for the gifts of the spirit, combined with their disregard for the imperative of love and for

their mission to their world has been examined. An understanding of church which places it in a relation of mutual critical correlation to the processes of global development is a challenge to ecclesiology of the present time.

It is to the present-day church and to the effort to interpret the tradition for today that I will turn in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

Within the Roman Catholic tradition world-wide the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) was an event which recognised and endorsed, at the level of official church teaching, two movements which were manifesting themselves among Catholic theologians and within the church from the early decades of the century. These were: (1) a return to the biblical and patristic sources of the Christian faith, and (2) the development of practice - especially liturgical and pastoral - in the light of these theological foundations on the one hand, and of the contemporary global and local contexts of the church on the other.

Vatican II promoted the theological and practical goals which, particularly in relation to parish communities, motivate this dissertation. My aim in this chapter is to study the ecclesiology of Vatican II, and especially its theology of local church. In the first section I will discuss from historical and theological perspectives the *context* and *purpose* of the Council. I will then review the main elements of the Council's ecclesiology, in which the return to biblical and patristic sources, which I have explored in the previous chapter, will be evident. This ecclesiology represents some remarkable shifts of emphasis from previous positions adopted by the Roman Catholic authorities. A significant element in the church's self-understanding as it emerged from Vatican II is its theology of the *local church*. I will underline the central importance of the local church in the vision of the church universal which was being developed as the successive drafts of the document on the church were taking shape during the first three sessions, 1962-64.

The history of the reception of Vatican II is an integral part of a study of the Council. It is also an important factor in determining the on-going possibilities of

implementation. In the third section of the chapter I will trace the reception of the Council's teaching both world-wide and in particular in the Irish context, as the setting of immediate relevance to my project. Finally, I refer to the ecumenical significance of the impetus given by Vatican II to a retrieval within the Roman Catholic tradition of a strong ecclesiological perspective on local church.

5.1 THE CONTEXT AND PURPOSE OF THE COUNCIL

Edward Schillebeeckx posits *two roots* for the organisational structure and the standing of local churches which characterised Roman Catholicism into the twentieth century. These are: the adaptation of the church to the structures of the society around it from the Constantinian period onwards, and the strong Counter-Reformation anti-democratic emphasis on hierarchical authority and on centralised control.¹ Imperial and feudal-type systems alike fostered dependence and passivity on the part of those removed from the (clerical) loci of authority and power. The approach of the rising guilds of the medieval bourgeoisie, who favoured a more egalitarian and participative mode of operating, was more acceptable to the reformers, especially Calvinists.

The Catholic ecclesiology which interpreted a particular church structure as divinely instituted made almost impossible for centuries any meaningful interrogation or self-criticism. Even Yves Congar's early theology of church made use of the distinction between 'structure' and 'life' and presents church structure as directly instituted through the ministry of Jesus.² In his later ecclesiology, however, Congar presents as the work of the Holy Spirit not just the 'life' of the church within

¹ *Church, the Human Story of God [Church]*, London: SCM Press, 1990, p. 187.

² The critique of the developing institutional structures which was advocated in chapter 4 could be applied to this position.

a given (unchangeable) structure, but within the totality of the church as a communion of persons.³

Insofar as a particular form of church is absolutised theologically, Schillebeeckx claims that it is 'simply a sign of ideological fundamentalism'.⁴ He does, of course, recognise the need to relate the existence of the church to the life and mission of Jesus:

Within our historical horizon of understanding and experiencing a history which continues after the death of Jesus, the biblical eschatological meaning of the history and career of Jesus call into being a new, 'church' history of Christian proclamation.⁵

The legitimisation of the 'pyramidal' form of church Schillebeeckx sees as

... based on two foundations: 1. The predominance of a christology which forgot the blowing of the Spirit over the lowermost levels of the church and in practice annexed the role of the Holy Spirit through the ministerial succession exclusively for the hierarchy; and 2. the social significance of papal infallibility.⁶

The hundred and fifty years before Vatican II were largely characterised by strong resistance on the part of the Roman church authorities to the impact of scholarship and social revolution alike on the cultural ethos and the circumstances of modern life.⁷ During that time official church teaching had 'oscillated between development and reaction' vis-à-vis the modern world.⁸ However, when Pope John XXIII declared his intention to convene the Second Vatican Council he made it clear

³ See Aidan Nichols, *Yves Congar*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989, p.156.

⁴ *Church*, p. 156.

⁵ *Church*, p.156.

⁶ *Church*, p.198. Schillebeeckx distinguishes between an infallibility circumscribed by the law of the church, which 'safeguards the unabbreviated gospel', and what he call 'a personality cult of the Pope'. p.199.

⁷ For example, the growing autonomy of 'the science of philosophical and moral matters' was sharply condemned by Pius IX in the *Syllabus of Errors*, AAS 3, 1867-68, pp. 168-176. The 'non-historical concept of truth' reflected in, for example, *Humani Generis*, AAS 42, 1950, pp. 561-78, is in stark contrast with Enlightenment ideas. Schillebeeckx, *Church*, pp. 200-203, nn. 32 and 43.

⁸ C. Butler, *The Theology of Vatican II* p.x.

that he envisaged it as a response to rapid and far-reaching social changes.⁹ Viewed historically it is arguable that the relationship between the Catholic church and its modern social world context was at a crossroads, and that there was a certain inevitability about the initiative of convoking the Council,¹⁰ even though the Pope justified his decision as a special inspiration from God.¹¹ Clearly, the call to distinguish the ‘signs of the times’, by which the Pope characterised the Council, implied a challenge to the church to develop its understanding of its Christian tradition in the light of contemporary human experiences, and in terms which would be intelligible to modern minds.

When, in Vatican II, the Roman Catholic church showed its readiness to enter into dialogue with the modern world in a spirit of freedom, openness and flexibility, Schillebeeckx notes the historical irony: ‘... the Western world was [at that time] beginning to become highly critical of the social and political shadow side of the bourgeois liberal approach’.¹² Nevertheless, Vatican II marks an important milestone in the history of the church, of its self-understanding and interpretation of its mission. Walter Kasper identifies as ‘the outstanding event in the Catholic theology of [the twentieth] century’ the surmounting of neo-scholasticism, and sees the Council as taking up, endorsing and developing the new approaches in theology

⁹ See, for example, the apostolic constitution *Humanae Salutis*, 25 December 1961 in which Pope John XXIII convoked the Council: ‘While humanity is on the edge of a new era, tasks of immense gravity and amplitude await the Church...’ *Documents* p. 703.

¹⁰ In fact, a decade earlier Pope Pius XII had initiated preparations for a Council that did not materialise. At the time, it was unclear whether such a Council would concern itself with doctrinal questions (and there was no one focus of attention in this area at the time) or with issues of Church and modern world, in general. The latter was needed, but there was not yet sufficient readiness on the part of the official organs of policy at the Vatican. Giovanni Caprile, *Il Concilio Vaticano II, l’Annunzio e la Preparazione, 1959-1962, Volume 1, Parte 1 – 1959-1960*, Rome: Edizioni ‘La Civiltà Cattolica’, p.15.

¹¹ ‘It was completely unexpected, like a flash of heavenly light, ...’.John XXIII, ‘Pope John’s Opening Speech to the Council’, *Documents* p. 712.

¹² *Church*, p. 200.

already outlined: the fact that Scripture was becoming once again ‘the soul of theology’; that the riches of the early Fathers, as well as the ‘riches of high scholasticism’, of liturgy and of hagiography were being explored, and that more open inter-church, inter-faith and inter-cultural relationships were being forged.¹³

The purpose of the twenty-first ecumenical council in the history of the church was, therefore, not to address any particular doctrinal issues but rather to consider more fundamentally the nature and role of the church in the modern world.

5.2 THE CHURCH IN THE DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II

In view of the purpose of the Council, it is clear that the self-understanding of the church and its relation to the world would permeate all of the Council’s work. However, these topics were the primary foci of the two documents, *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes* respectively. The evolution of *LG* through three sessions of the Council was just one instance of the struggle which was witnessed at each session as the members sought agreed understandings and expressions of the meaning of the church. *Lumen gentium* had a difficult passage, as I will outline below, from the first draft *schema* to the final version promulgated on 21 November 1964.¹⁴

5.2.1 The Church as Mystery

The dedication of the opening chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution on the church, *Lumen gentium* to ‘The Mystery of the church’ resulted from a radical redrafting which took place between the first and second sessions of Vatican II. Instead of

¹³ W. Kasper, *Theology and Church*, London: SCM Press, 1989. p.1-2.

¹⁴ The final voting was 2,151 votes in favour, and 5 opposed. *The Third Session*, London: Faber and Faber, 1965, p. 285.

beginning with a discussion of the structures and government of the church, as the original draft schema would have it, the document begins with a portrayal of the church as a people to whom God communicates Godself in love.¹⁵ Walter Kasper observes that the Council 'moved into the foreground the mystery of the church, which can only be grasped in faith, over against the one-sided concentration on the visible and hierarchical form of the church, which had held sway during the previous three centuries'.¹⁶ The document makes clear from the outset that it will never be possible to be definitive in describing the reality of the church.

The church as mystery can only be grasped in faith, as Kasper observes, and the Council offers the full range of biblical images through which understanding may be developed and commitment fostered: the sheepfold, the flock, the field, a building or temple, the family of God, the bride of Christ, and, of course, the body of Christ.¹⁷ The self-understanding which supports what the Council says of the church in its opening chapter, and indeed in the whole of its work is that:

by her relationship with Christ, the church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all mankind. She is also an instrument for the achievement of such union and unity.¹⁸

Kasper counters suggestions of ideological intentions in the use of the idea of 'sacrament' to describe the church, and stresses the critical implications of the concept, which was requested by a number of bishops as an alternative to triumphalism, clericalism and legalism.¹⁹ He traces its origins in the theology of the Catholic school at Tübingen in the nineteenth century, and its espousal, from the 1930s onwards by de Lubac, Rahner and Schillebeeckx among others. As used by

¹⁵ cf. Avery Dulles, 'The Church' (an introduction to *Lumen gentium*), *Documents*, pp. 9-13.

¹⁶ Kasper, *Theology and Church*, p. 151.

¹⁷ See *LG*, 6ff.

¹⁸ *LG* 1.

¹⁹ *Theology and Church*, p.113.

the Council, it is always set in a christological context. It is Christ who, through his Spirit, has made the church the comprehensive sacrament of salvation²⁰ and thus brings about the union with God and the unity of humanity. The church is a 'kind of sign or sacrament' of this salvation, and she is also an 'instrument' for its achievement'.²¹ Thus, there is also an eschatological dimension to the use of this concept by the Council. In time and space, the church is charged with the task of preaching the word, mediating the grace of the sacraments, serving the needs of the poor and thus bringing about the community of the kingdom.²²

Kasper observes that the Latin word *sacramentum* was used to translate the biblical term *mysterion*, and that it, also, is used there in a christological sense. As such it stands for 'that transcendent, salvific divine reality which reveals itself in a visible way [through relationship with Christ]'.²³ Both facets of church, its relatedness through Christ to the mystery of God and its connectedness also in Christ to the human community, are essential to what it is, neither a totally spiritual reality nor a mere sociological phenomenon. It is endowed by the Spirit of the risen Lord with its character and its role of continuing in the world the mission of Jesus who is the primal sacrament.

In Vatican II the animating role of the Holy Spirit throughout the church is highlighted, without the distinctions between classes of people which were represented in earlier ecclesiologies. Congar argues, notwithstanding views to the contrary,²⁴ that elements of a true pneumatology were present in the Second Vatican Council's deliberations and have since then been active in the reflections of the

²⁰ See *LG*, 48.

²¹ See *LG*, 1.

²² The characteristic features of the Church, as already found in the early communities (cf. Chapter 4) emerge also in this treatment by the Council of its nature and its mission.

²³ *Theology and Church*, p.118.

²⁴ 'The Pneumatology of Vatican II' ['Pneumatology'], *I believe in the Holy Spirit*, Vol. 1, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983, p. 167.

Catholic church. On Congar's assessment 'the pneumatology of the Council ...stresses that the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ [who] carries out the work of Christ and builds up the Body of Christ.'²⁵

A new theology, or rather a new programme of 'ministries', giving the church a new face that is quite different from the one that the earlier pyramidal and clerical ecclesiology presented, has developed since the Second Vatican Council on the basis of ... charisms used for the common good and the building up of the church.²⁶

5.2.2 The Church as People of God

The church's mission is historical, in that it exists among people in given times and places. In its account of the church as the 'People of God' the Council emphasises the communal nature of the church as a pilgrim people who share together in the priestly, prophetic and kingly roles of Christ. By participating in the sacramental life of their church, by witnessing to their faith in the circumstances of their lives by means of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and by building up the human community to which they belong, the faithful fulfil their mission since 'all are called to salvation by the grace of God'.²⁷ The diversity which comes naturally from the church's presence 'among all the nations of the earth'²⁸ is welcomed for the enrichment it brings. Internally, while various ranks arise within the church 'either by reason of their duties, as is the case with those who exercise the sacred ministry for the good of their brethren, or by reason of their situation and way of life...',²⁹ the Council's treatment of the People of God suggests that the church as a community is supported by its institutional elements.

²⁵ 'Pneumatology, p. 167. Congar quotes *LG 7*, *LG 8*, and *LG 14*, as examples.

²⁶ 'Pneumatology', p. 170.

²⁷ *LG 13*.

²⁸ *LG 13*.

²⁹ *LG 13*.

5.2.3 The Hierarchically-structured Church

Following its discussions on church as Mystery and the People of God, the Council discusses 'the hierarchical structure of the church with special reference to the episcopate'. A disjunction with previous chapters that is directly obvious is explainable in terms of the 'compromise' nature of the document. At the Council, as has been noted, a tension existed between those whose concern was for preservation of order and continuity, and those who wished to envisage the church as returning to its sources and as open to the 'signs of the times'. The method of juxtaposition of seemingly polemical viewpoints which was used by the Council will be explored at greater length in the discussion of a hermeneutic of the Council in the next chapter.

By the order of the first three chapters in the document, it is arguable that the Council envisages the church primarily in terms of the self-communication of God in Christ, which is shared in the fellowship of the church. By opening its treatment of the church in what is agreed to be its most important document with the nature of the church as mystery and in particular as a sacrament of union with God and the unity of humanity, followed by a representation of the church as the People of God, it presents these as the foundational characteristics of the church; whatever is held as essential with regard to structures and internal systems of organisation exists in service of the fundamental nature of the whole church, and of its mission of presence in human societies. Thus, it may be claimed that the structure of *LG* points to the sacramental and communal characteristics of the church as essential. If this is accepted, then the Council's treatment of hierarchical structure is set in perspective as the mechanism which supports church as the People of God and resonates to the guidance of the Spirit within the church.

Given the historical setting of Vatican II, however, it was to be expected that

hierarchical structure would begin with the legacy of defined Papal infallibility, in comparative isolation from the church body as a whole, even though 'by 1962 there was a growing sense among theologians that some complementation of Vatican I's papalism was overdue'.³⁰ The document *Lumen gentium* struggles with the concepts of episcopacy, collegiality and primacy. It is clear that in juridical terms alone there can never be a resolution of two supremacies – that of the Pope and that of the College of Bishops, whose authority is never seen in the document as deriving only from the Pope, and yet is exercised only in union with him.³¹

It is on the bishops that the whole structure of the church turns, according to these passages of *LG*. As 'stewards of the mysteries of God' they are charged with the tasks of teaching, sanctifying and ruling within the church. The fullness of the sacrament of Holy Orders, conferred by episcopal consecration, enriches them for the task which they fulfil within their dioceses. This position of the Council reflects the developing ecclesologies of the early Fathers of the church which were explored in chapter 4. *LG* sets its understanding of the local church, and 'legitimate local congregations' within the context of its treatment of the ministry of the bishop.³²

The role of the priest within the church is presented in *Lumen gentium* and expanded in the decree on the ministry and life of priests, *Presbyterorum ordinis*, as co-worker with the bishop. (It is important to note that there is no suggestion here of an analogy with the relationship of the College of Bishops to the Pope.) What has been said above about the execution by the Bishop of his teaching, sanctifying and

³⁰ C. Butler, *The Theology of Vatican II*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981, p. 82.

³¹ *LG* 22. Butler quotes Dr. Michael Ramsey, Archbishop of Canterbury, to illustrate how within a different framework 'a primacy should depend upon and express the organic authority of the body; and the discovery of its precise functions will come not by discussion of the Petrine claims in isolation but by the recovery everywhere of the body's organic life, with its bishops, presbyters and people'.
p. 83.

³² *LG*, 26.

ruling functions carries over to the priest, who fulfils his role in the immediacy of the relationships which can exist within the parish/pastoral setting.

Within the institutionally-structured church mechanisms for expressing the theological reality of the church as a corporate whole i.e. clerical and lay, are essential. Otherwise it is difficult to avoid perpetuating a passive role for those outside of ordination. Unless there are structures, at all levels, to express the inner reality of church as a people with a mission there is a great risk that the concept of ministry, in the sense of public service within the church (even if it were made more flexible) will be interpreted as the totality of the exercise of mission, at the expense of the calling of all the faithful.

When *LG* considers the church, not only as *mysterium-sacrament* but also as ‘visible structure’, it is nonetheless clear that the church is not two but one reality, as Christ, while divine and human, is one person. ‘Just as the assumed nature inseparably united to the divine Word serves Him as a living instrument of salvation, so, in a similar way, does the communal structure of the church serve Christ’s Spirit who vivifies it by way of building up the body’.³³ Congar goes so far as to say that the comparison between the visible and the spiritual (the human and the divine aspects of the church) and the union of the two natures in Christ is made for the purpose of attributing to the Holy Spirit the task of animating the church as an event here and now.³⁴

5.2.4 Continuity and Change in the Ecclesiology of Vatican II

As Emmanuel Lanne observes a ‘vision of a centralised church as a single society, visible and universal’ characterised Catholic ecclesiology prior to the renewal

³³ *LG*, 8.

³⁴ cf. ‘Pneumatology’, p. 168.

movements of the twentieth century, and in official statements of Roman Catholic church up to Vatican II. After Trent (1545-1563) the ecclesiology of the Catholic church was predominantly (if not exclusively) juridical and its vision of itself was largely that of a *societas perfecta*.³⁵ The Encyclical of Pius XII, *Mystici corporis* (1943) interpreted the external structures of the church as the outcome of the work and teaching of Christ, through the apostles and their successors. In the document, however, the presence and action of the Spirit was limited to the 'charismatic' and, by implication, peripheral elements of the church – for example religious life and extraordinary gifts.

Speaking of *Mystici corporis*, Lanne says that it was 'both a point of arrival and a point of departure'. The Encyclical of Pius XII, he observes, '... arose from a unilateral or, one might say, pyramidal concept which took no account of the total reality of the church, neither from a historical nor a theological point of view'.³⁶ This concept is evident, for example, in the role assigned to the laity, even while including them in the mission of the church:

... not only the clergy and those ... in religious life, but the other members of the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ as well have, each in his degree, the obligation of working hard and constantly for the building up and increase of this Body... especially ... members of Catholic Action who assist the Bishops and the priests in their apostolic labours...³⁷

Mystici Corporis retained the motif of the *societas perfecta*:

... the church, a perfect society of its kind, is not made up of merely moral and juridical elements and principles ... that which lifts the Society of Christians far above the whole natural order is the Spirit of our Redeemer.

³⁵ The term is used in the sense that it is 'subordinate to no other and lacks nothing required for its own institutional completeness'. A. Dulles, *Models of the Church*, New York: Doubleday, 1974, p. 31. Dulles points out the origin of the concept of *societas perfecta* in the ecclesiology of Robert Bellarmine. Rahner characterises the *societas perfecta* as 'an organization founded by Christ, with its offices and ministries, hierarchically structured and jurisdictionally empowered', 'The Parish', p. 26.

³⁶ 'Catholicity and Apostolicity', pp. 295-296.

³⁷ *Mystici Corporis (MC)*, 98.

While the 'juridical commission of Ruler and Teacher' is envisaged as being received from Christ, the Holy Spirit has an 'invisible mission' and these presences complement each other as do body and soul.³⁸ According to the Encyclical, in the Mystical Body the Holy Spirit is present 'entire in the Head [who is Christ], entire in the body'.³⁹ The import of a life shared in the body is immediately qualified, however, with the following: the Holy Spirit 'in the inferior members acts also through the ministry of the higher members'.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, *Mystici corporis* endorsed for its time the use of an organic image from the scriptures and in that way may indeed be said to have marked a 'point of departure' in the official teaching of the church.

In the self-understanding of the church as the People of God the Council distances itself from the idea of *societas perfecta* which was so prevalent in the doctrinal tracts on the church prior to Vatican II.⁴¹ As M-J le Guillou observes;

the notion of society ... led to a static conception of the church as a fully-formed juridical institution, standing outside time, and resulted in the practical disappearance of the whole dynamic vision of the church as the instrument of a plan of universal and cosmic dimensions'.⁴²

In his opening address to the Council, the Pope reiterated the traditional belief in the 'sacred deposit of Christian doctrine' which was at once to be 'guarded' and 'taught more efficaciously'.⁴³ While never departing from 'the sacred patrimony of truth' the church must ever look to the present, to the 'new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world...'.⁴⁴ This tension between continuity and

³⁸ *MC*, 65.

³⁹ *MC* 55. It is important to note the implication here of an exclusive presence of the Spirit in the [Catholic] Church, a teaching which has been very definitely surpassed in Vatican II, for example in its recognition of elements of the church of Christ in other ecclesial communities ref.....

⁴⁰ *MC* 55.

⁴¹ See note 35, p. 166 above.

⁴² 'Church', *Encyclopedia*, pp. 215-216.

⁴³ *Documents* p. 712.

⁴⁴ *Documents* p. 714.

change ran right through the work of the Council, its documents, and the era that it heralded. A balancing of interests is evident throughout the Opening Speech:

... from the renewed, serene, and tranquil adherence to all the teaching of the church in its entirety and preciseness, ...the Christian, Catholic, and apostolic spirit of the whole world expects a step forward toward a doctrinal penetration and a formation of consciousness in faithful and perfect conformity to the authentic doctrine, which, however, should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought. The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another.⁴⁵

The emphasis of the Council, notwithstanding its commitment to be faithful to its inheritance, was to be on the 'way it is presented': 'And it is the latter that must be taken into great consideration with patience if necessary, everything being measured in the forms and proportions of a magisterium which is predominantly pastoral in character'.⁴⁶ In relation to those whom the church believes to be in error the 'medicine of mercy rather than that of severity' will be used.⁴⁷ By sharing her truth, she will contribute to 'concord, just peace and the ... unity of all'.⁴⁸ This section of the Speech echoes the view of Congar that in 1962 'the scrutiny of the church comes from a world which is asking the church to enter with it into an authentic discussion of Jesus Christ. The crisis is apostolic and missionary'.⁴⁹ The task of the Council was, then, 'not a matter of steadying the Catholic mind in face of internal dangers, but of adapting the church to the world with which she is involved, because to it she has been sent'.⁵⁰

While the Council reiterates the traditional teaching that the church is

⁴⁵ *Documents* p. 715.

⁴⁶ *Documents* p. 715.

⁴⁷ *Documents* p. 716. This veiled reference distances the Council from the condemnatory style of the Roman authorities in earlier times.

⁴⁸ *Documents* p. 717.

⁴⁹ Congar, *Report from Rome, The First Session of the Vatican Council*, Liverpool and London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1963, p. 9.

⁵⁰ Congar, *Report from Rome*, p. 13.

necessary for salvation, it reflects with realism on the fact that all people do not and never will belong to the church. The concept of ‘anonymous Christian’ developed by Rahner is not specifically mentioned, but people of good will are presented as having access to the salvific gift of God.⁵¹ Rahner’s introduction of the concept of ‘anonymous Christian’⁵² has not been universally approved. Avery Dulles, among others, did not reconcile the idea with mainstream ecclesiology, while Medard Kehl rejects it as ‘having no connection with the biblical notion of the “people of God” ’.⁵³ To those outside the Christian tradition it may indeed appear imperialist. The concept needs to be read in the light of Rahner’s fundamental theological axiom, that Jesus Christ is the ultimate self-gift of God to humankind. To identify radical acceptance of one’s being and morally responsible behaviour on the part of those who have not been in a way of hearing the Christian message as ‘anonymous’ Christianity, is therefore, for Rahner, to respect and not dishonour them as some might think. Rahner himself was quite sure that the Council taught materially what was meant by the thesis of the anonymous Christian.⁵⁴ The theory, he points out, ‘in no way cripples the missionary impulse of the church but rather puts before it the person[s] to whom it addresses itself in [their] true hopeful condition so that it can approach [them] with confidence’.⁵⁵ Thus the call to preach the message of Christ is supported, rather than mitigated by the Council’s teaching on the universality of God’s saving grace.

In declaring that the church of Christ ‘subsists’ in the Catholic church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in union with that

⁵¹ *LG*, 16.

⁵² ‘Rahner interpreted the certainty of God’s offer within the Church as the sacrament of what was actually offered to all.’ Richard Lennan, *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner [Ecclesiology]*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 39.

⁵³ See Lennan, *Ecclesiology*, p. 39.

⁵⁴ ‘Anonymous Christians’, *TI* Vol. vi, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1969, p. 397.

⁵⁵ ‘Anonymous Christians’, p. 397..

successor'⁵⁶ the Council is issuing an unprecedented statement. By allowing that the 'church of Christ' is not essentially and exclusively identical to the Catholic Church, a renewed respect for and impetus towards building of relationships is fostered.

5.2.5 The Emergence of a 'World Church'

Rahner identifies as the major change in understanding which emerged through the Council, indeed as 'the fundamental theological significance of Vatican II' the fact that there, for the first time, Christianity began to *be*, and to *see itself* as a world church: 'the Second Vatican Council is, in a rudimentary form still groping for identity, the church's first official self-actualization *as* a world church.'⁵⁷ Given the presence of indigenous bishops from the African, Asian and Latin American continents, an exclusively Roman ethos was no longer possible. The development of a theology of local church, as discussed in the first section of this chapter is a constitutive element in this 'world church'. It is the common allegiance to Christ, present in the local church, and in the church in its catholicity and unity, which is the foundation of the relationship of *communio* as presented by Vatican II. In true *communio* there is dialogue between the partners in a discernment of truth. The criterion by which Rahner makes his assessment of Vatican II as the turning point is this: 'a world church as such begins to act through the reciprocal influence exercised by all its components.'⁵⁸

Christianity had spread throughout the known world, not least as concomitant of colonisation. But, Rahner argues, it was largely as an 'export product' that the

⁵⁶ *LG*, 8.

⁵⁷ 'Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II' ['Fundamental Interpretation'], *TS*, (40) 1979, p. 717.

⁵⁸ 'Fundamental Interpretation', p. 717.

gospel was carried from its Eurocentric base.⁵⁹ Earlier developments such as the ordination of indigenous bishops, Rahner sees as antecedents to what happened at Vatican II. Likewise, Congar recognised the limited value of the ‘creation of indigenous hierarchies [since that] scarcely scratches the surface of the problem of native expression in worship and belief’.⁶⁰

Rahner recognises that ‘the importance of the non-western part of the total episcopate may still have been relatively modest’.⁶¹ Nevertheless, in support of his thesis, he surveys the major documents of the Council. In *Sacrosanctum concilium*, for example he sees the ‘victory of the vernacular’ as highly symbolic of a move away from the Roman dominance of liturgy. In the doctrinal statements on the church and Revelation, Rahner holds, we can see the move towards a world church only if we compare the tenor of the documents with their precursors, the neo-scholastic schemata that were prepared in Rome before the Council.⁶² The exclusiveness of the vision of church in *Mystici corporis*, for example, has already been discussed. The teaching of the Council on the episcopate illustrates the change, as does the treatment in the *Declaration on the Relation of the church to Non-Christian Religions* with its ‘truly positive evaluation of the great world religions [which] is initiated for the first time in the doctrinal history of the church’.⁶³ Similarly the documents on ecumenism, on the missions and on religious liberty signal a new openness to the possibility of ‘salvific revelation-faith’ outside the boundaries of the Catholic church, of Christendom, and indeed of any of the world religions. In contrast to the position taken by *Mystici corporis*, the Council

⁵⁹ ‘Fundamental Interpretation’, p. 717.

⁶⁰ *Report from Rome*, p. 11.

⁶¹ ‘Fundamental Interpretation’, p. 719.

⁶² ‘Fundamental Interpretation’, pp. 719-720.

⁶³ ‘Fundamental Interpretation’, p. 720.

recognises that the presence of the Spirit in the belief and lives of sincere people beyond the boundaries of the Catholic or the Christian churches is the basis of their dignity and of the necessity for on-going dialogue. The Council's Constitution on the church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, too, marks a development, however slow this may be in practice, towards a 'political theology [which] can no longer be excluded from the consciousness of a world church'.⁶⁴

Rahner assesses the transformation symbolised and initiated by Vatican II as being only the second major shift in identity in the history of Christianity, since the adaptation of the message coming out of the village culture of Palestine to that of the Greco-Roman world with its cities, its organisation and its political systems:

...in the history of Christianity the transition of Christianity from one historical and theological situation to an essentially new one did happen *once*, and ... now in the transition from a Christianity of Europe (with its American annexes) to a fully world religion is starting to happen for a second time.⁶⁵

Rahner acknowledges a number of sociological influences which may make the current transition less visible. He observes that there are processes of change in train in emerging countries and continents that make inculturation of Christianity difficult. He also recognises that a 'a levelling layer of rational-industrial culture from Europe and the United States lies over ... other cultures' which may still lead to an acceptance of Christianity in its Roman form as part of the 'dubious blessings of the

⁶⁴ 'Fundamental Interpretation', p. 719.

⁶⁵ 'Fundamental Interpretation', p. 722. Giuseppe Ruggieri draws attention to 'another important historical and theological periodization of the Council, according to which in the history of the church there is not only the break with the primitive church but also the break with the Constantinian era, so that Vatican II would amount to a third break. This is the reading that M-D Chenu already gave during the preparatory period: "La fin de l'ère constantinienne", in *Un Concile pour Notre Temps. Journées d'études des Informations Catholiques Internationales* Paris 1961, 59-87'. See Ruggieri, 'Towards a Hermeneutic of Vatican II, *Concilium*, 1999/1. Historians such as August Franzen adopt yet another approach. The Church as the dominant factor of the Western community of Christian nations (c.700-1300) may be said to have begun its transition to a world mission in the 14th century, when the course of 'the disintegration of European political unity brought in its train that of the Church',... a process which reached its ecclesiastical climax in the great division of the Church in the 16th century. See 'Church History', *Encyclopedia of Theology, A Concise Sacramentum Mundi [Encyclopedia]*, K. Rahner (ed.), London: Burns & Oates, 1975, pp. 250-270.

West'.⁶⁶ Moreover, by contrast with the first major break by Christianity into the Mediterranean and Germanic worlds, there is as yet no theology of the transition which Rahner is discussing.

There is nothing automatic about the emergence of a new world church.

Rather, Vatican II has challenged the church:

This then, is the issue: either the church sees and recognizes [the] essential differences of other cultures for which she should become a world church and with a Pauline boldness draws the necessary consequences from this recognition, or she remains a Western church and so in the final analysis betrays the meaning of Vatican II.⁶⁷

5.3 THE LOCAL CHURCH IN THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF VATICAN II

5.3.1 'Particular' or 'Local' Churches and the Universal Church

In the documents of Vatican II the terms 'local' and 'particular' are used variously and interchangeably to designate the church in regions and dioceses without definitive or consistent application of the terms to specific levels or instances of church. Patriarchal churches, too, and dioceses in the Eastern rite are called 'local' or 'particular'.⁶⁸ In the documents as a whole, the term 'particular' is preferred, and it is used especially but not exclusively in relation to diocese.⁶⁹ In this dissertation the term 'local' will be used most frequently to refer to the church of a region or diocese.

There is no systematic exposition of the idea of the local church in the documents of Vatican II. Nevertheless the vision of the church as realised in its particularity in all its geographic, social and cultural settings is one of the most striking elements of the Council's teaching taken as a whole. At the same time the

⁶⁶ 'Fundamental Interpretation', p. 723.

⁶⁷ 'Fundamental Interpretation', p. 724.

⁶⁸ Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio (UR)*, 14.

⁶⁹ e.g. Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church, *Christus dominus (CD)*, Chapter II: 'Bishops in their Particular Churches or Dioceses'. *Documents*, p. 403.

reality of a universal church, most often signified in the Council as 'church', is fully recognised in the documents. But what is made clear is this: the church (universal) is realized actually and fully in the local churches, and without local churches' taking form in their own time and place the universal church would not arise nor would it attain its 'catholicity'. This understanding reflects closely the theology of Karl Rahner which he was developing during the decades preceding the Council.

Komonchak identifies the key theological themes in the Council's statements about the church as: 'first the assertion that the distinctive and constitutive principles of the church's existence are realized in the local church, and second, the desire to stress that it is in the local churches that the church's catholicity is concretely realized.'⁷⁰ That the local churches are *churches* is emphasised, and the judgement is based on the fact that these churches are assemblies of believers who come together through the 'call of God, the word of Christ, the grace of the Spirit, and the exercise of the apostolic ministry, especially through the Eucharist'.⁷¹ The centrality of the 'Lord's Supper' in the life of the early communities of Antioch and Corinth emerged in Chapter 4. It is in order that the community may gather for the celebration that its life is to be one of harmonious unity, conflicts having been resolved; and in turn, by gathering and partaking in the ritual, the members undertake to live according to their faith.

That the local churches are truly *local*, i.e. localised realisations of church in their own place and time, is equally stressed by the Council in many passages which refer to the multiplicity and variety of place in which the church exists. Vatican II is emphatic that the church community must understand and express its beliefs and

⁷⁰ 'Ministry and the Local Church', *CTSA*, (36), 1981, p. 57.

⁷¹ Komonchak, 'The Local Realization of the Church' ['Local Realization'], *The Reception of Vatican II*, G. Alberigo, J.P. Jossua, Komonchak, J. A. (eds.), M.J. O'Connell (trans.) Washington DC: Catholic University of America, 1987, p. 77.

mission in terms of the social and cultural reality in which it finds itself, having regard for the unity of the church in essentials.⁷²

The Council applies these characteristics of local church across the spectrum of degrees of particularity, for example, from the churches of a rite, to a patriarchate, a region or a diocese. In practice, many difficulties and tensions arise from the implementation of the view of church as at once particular and local, and at the same time united with the church universal.⁷³

Chronologically, the first statement by the Council of its vision of the local church was in the Constitution of the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium* (SC). That the Council is here considering the diocese, rather than the parish, as local church is clear from the fact that the bishop is seen as its 'high priest' of the diocese, the source of their 'life in Christ' for all concerned.⁷⁴ The article emphasises the celebration of the Eucharist as the central defining event of the local church. The document goes on to recognise the practical necessity of the parishes which are established by the bishop, but it is their liturgical life and their relationship to the bishop which are to be fostered, as well as a sense of community.⁷⁵ Emmanuel Lanne comments on this first reference to the local church: 'It amounts to a genuine rediscovery of the significance of the local congregation as a centre of communion to which all the other aspects of the life of the church are directed'.⁷⁶ He also cautions that *Sacrosanctum concilium* is not a treatise on ecclesiology, and observes that later documents would 'complete the new ecclesiological perspective inaugurated by this

⁷² e.g. *LG*, 13. *AG*, 19.

⁷³ For example, as local churches, understanding themselves as community, introduce structures for participation by the total community of the baptised in all aspects of their life as local church in fidelity to the *communio* ecclesiology of Vatican II, it is sometimes difficult for them to maintain loyalties to a church which retains a clerical and hierarchical form in its wider organisation.

⁷⁴ *Sacrosanctum concilium* (SC), 41.

⁷⁵ SC, 42.

⁷⁶ E. Lanne, 'Pluralism and Unity. The possibility of a variety of typologies within the same ecclesial allegiance' ['Pluralism and Unity'], *One in Christ*, (6), 1970, p. 446.

constitution'.⁷⁷

The presentation of parish as coming into existence because of the practical impossibility of the bishop 'always and everywhere presid[ing] over the whole flock in his church'⁷⁸ contrasts with Rahner's theology of the parish as itself the community of believers who gather as a worshipping community to commemorate Christ's death and resurrection, and thus they make present in their time and place the salvific presence of God:

We can say ... that the parish is the primary realization of the church as event, because the parochial Eucharistic celebration is the most original and natural in regard to the placeness of the Eucharist.⁷⁹

In the Constitution on the church, *Lumen gentium* (LG), the Council moves its vision of the local church forward. It does this, like *Sacrosanctum concilium*, in the context of its treatment of the role of the bishop. While it is recognised that '[the] church of Christ is truly present in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful which, united with their pastors, are themselves called churches in the New Testament',⁸⁰ the article is governed by the concept of 'the sacred ministry of the bishop'. It is in this context that the Council acknowledges that 'in [altar] communities, though frequently small and poor, or living far from any other, Christ is present'.⁸¹ This is what effects in them a gathering of the 'one holy, catholic and apostolic church'.

The particular church which is the diocese is defined in the Council's Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the church, *Christus dominus* (CD):

A diocese is that portion of God's people which is entrusted to a bishop to be shepherded by him with the cooperation of the

⁷⁷ 'The Local Church: its Catholicity and Apostolicity ['Catholicity and Apostolicity'], *One in Christ* (6), p. 299.

⁷⁸ SC 42.

⁷⁹ 'The Parish', p. 32.

⁸⁰ *Lumen gentium* (LG), 26.

⁸¹ LG 26.

presbyters. Adhering thus to its pastor and gathered together by him in the Holy Spirit through the gospel and the Eucharist, this portion constitutes a particular church in which the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church is truly present and operative.⁸²

Thus, the Council affirms strongly the ecclesiological vision of the local church as making truly present and operative the universal church. What is striking about this passage is its inclusiveness. The diocese is 'a portion' yes, but a portion which comprises God's people in that place. All the people of the diocese are the subjects which constitute the particular church of the diocese. The role of bishop and priests is to lead and gather the whole people, in the Holy Spirit, through the gospel and the Eucharist.

This vision of church, local and universal, ascribes to all, clerical and lay, full and equal membership of the church community, with shared responsibility for the mission of the church which, while it may differ with role, is not limited to one sector or the other. That this is a major development in the church's official representation of itself has already been highlighted above.⁸³

In the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the church, *Ad gentes* (AG) Chapter III is devoted entirely to local or 'particular' churches. If the church is to be truly local the congregation of the faithful must be 'rooted in social life and considerably adapted to local culture'.⁸⁴ While communion with the universal church is to be preserved, the 'young churches' are invited to become partners in pooling of resources and insights, rather than remain indefinitely as 'missionary churches'. A local church, in the view of the Council, is of necessity a church community of bishop, priests, religious and laity. The invitation to theological investigation that is extended to the 'new churches' is arguably a move of the

⁸² CD 11.

⁸³ See section 5.2.3, p. 163 above.

⁸⁴ AG 19.

Council which has potentially some of the most far-reaching consequences:

Thus it will be more clearly seen in what ways faith can seek for understanding in the philosophy and wisdom of these peoples. A better view will be gained of how their customs, outlook on life, and social order can be reconciled with the manner of living taught by divine revelation. As a result, avenues will be opened for a more profound adaptation in the whole area of Christian life. Thanks to such a procedure, every appearance of syncretism and of false particularism can be excluded, and Christian life can be accommodated to the genius and the dispositions of each culture.⁸⁵

It is in its opening up to the cultures of the world, so that it becomes truly a ‘concrete universal, one not in spite of but precisely in and because of the variety of the local churches’ that Vatican II can be said to represent ‘something like a Copernican revolution in ecclesiology’.⁸⁶ The hegemony of Rome, so characteristic of the centuries before the Council, was in principle eased. How the possibilities of this new situation have been explored around the world, in the development of truly local churches, will be discussed below.⁸⁷

Finally, the Council’s decree on Ecumenism stresses the presence of Christ in the Eucharistic liturgies of Eastern Catholics which they celebrate ‘united with their bishop’.⁸⁸ In their particular time and place and idiom, the church is actualised: ‘... through the celebration of the Eucharist of the Lord in each of these churches, the church of God is built up and grows in stature’.⁸⁹ Lanne observes the paradox ‘that it should be with reference to the Orthodox churches ... that the Council should have used, to state the ecclesiological significance of the eucharistic celebrations, expressions which, if not its strongest, are at least the most dynamic – edification and increase’.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ AG 22.

⁸⁶ Komonchak, ‘Local Realization’, p. 78.

⁸⁷ See section 5.4 pp. 181 ff. below.

⁸⁸ SC 15.

⁸⁹ UR 15.

⁹⁰ ‘Catholicity and Apostolicity’, p. 303.

5.3.2 The Mission of the Local Church in the Teaching of the Council

When Vatican II emphasises that the local church is, in communion with the Bishop, truly the church of Christ present in time and place, it is also presenting the local church with its call to mission. Some dimensions of this mission will now be explored by means of the major themes of the ecclesiology of the Council.

In presenting the church as a sacrament of unity with God and humankind, Vatican II is calling local churches to be the living and effective witnesses of that unity. What this means in practice requires, of necessity, an appropriation of the theology of church, understood in its universality, by the community of the region or diocese. This requirement challenges church leaders, for example in planning liturgies for rites of passage, still desired by many in so-called post-Christian settings, in images and idioms which communicate the essence of what is being celebrated. On the structural level, it calls the church community to declare and show itself by its action to be on the side of justice, in its local situation to begin with as well as in relation to global issues. Thus through its witness, liturgy and commitment to justice the community of faith is built up.⁹¹

In its use of the biblically-rich description of the church as the People of God⁹² the Council focuses attention on the church as a pilgrim people, the Christian community in each place. The church as community in its existential reality is challenged to mutual concern and care, and also to recognise the realities of human limitations and sinfulness, not just in those whom it encounters outside of itself, but also internally. A 'new programme of ministries' envisaged by Congar⁹³ moves the self-understanding of church to focus on people and their several, diverse gifts, and

⁹¹ The characteristics of the Church as community. See section 4.5.1, p. 132, above.

⁹² For Paul's development of this theme see section 4.4.1, p 120, above.

⁹³ See above p.162.

to welcome them in the service of the mission in the local context.

In the light of the openness of the Council to the presence of ecclesial and salvific elements outside of the Roman church, the mission of Catholics within their local community can be interpreted as a call to on-going dialogue with other Christians, with people of other faiths and with their fellow human beings. The goal of this dialogue may be formulated theologically as the reign or Kingdom of God. However, the collaboration must be directed towards a vision for humanity which is shared.

The responsiveness of the Council to the human experiences of all people, expressed in the Pastoral Constitution on the church in the Modern World, is groundbreaking. The work of human progress is of great relevance to the coming of the Kingdom insofar as it is a work of liberation and transformation, i.e. a work which replaces injustice and oppression with equality, dignity and freedom. The presence of the Spirit of the Lord who 'fills the whole earth' is spoken of many times in the Council documents.⁹⁴ The Spirit 'directs the unfolding of time and renews the face of the earth [and] is not absent from ... development'.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, as Michael Stogre observes: '[the] crucial linkage between progress and the Kingdom remains one of the great unresolved issues of Vatican II.'⁹⁶ Rahner, in correspondence with H. Vorgrimler, expressed his view of GS as a limited response to the issues of church-world relationship. Much more expert work would be needed over a longer period, he thought, in order to discern what needed to be said.⁹⁷ The view that the church has no mission in the political, economic or social order⁹⁸ is (justifiably)

⁹⁴ e.g. GS 11. *PO* 22.

⁹⁵ GS, 22,4;37,4.

⁹⁶ 'Commentary on the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World', in *Vatican II Reconsidered*, George P. Schner (ed.), London: University Press of America, 1986, p. 24.

⁹⁷ Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner, an Introduction to his Life and Thought*, London: SCM Press, p.184.

⁹⁸ GS, 42.

interpreted by Stogre as reflecting a hierarchical, even clerical view of church, a view which also leads commentators such as Butler to equate the church's ministry with that of the ordained. However, in *GS* 43 church members are exhorted to engage in all human activity in such a way that they are 'harmonised unto God's glory'. To discern what this calls for in practice is a challenge to each local church in its social and cultural context.

5.4 THE RECEPTION OF VATICAN II

5.4.1 The Reception of the Council by the Church World-wide

The basic equality within the church, as the People of God, across the community of the baptised, lay and ordained has been highlighted. If this is accepted, it follows that responsibility for action is also shared. Nevertheless, in practice, the attitudes and actions of hierarchical authorities of particular or local churches in the period after the Council were crucial to its reception. This fact is explained by the hierarchical style of leadership exercised in dioceses prior to Vatican II, when any consultation which took place was done within the ranks of clergy. Equally it is true that the implementation of a Council which stressed the rightful participation of all members in the life and mission of the church can 'reach maturity only slowly; it cannot be replaced by an action of the hierarchy alone'.⁹⁹

The implementation of Vatican II requires fidelity to the spirit which pervades the Council documents. Indeed, as Alberigo observes with reference to a pastoral council, 'postconciliar activity cannot be restricted to "implementation" or even principally to "reception" but must necessarily find expression in an active and creative "consensus"'.¹⁰⁰ In the absence of structures at central, diocesan or parish

⁹⁹ Alberigo, *Reception*, p. 24.

¹⁰⁰ *Reception*, p. 16-17, n 53.

levels which recognised the laity as other than passive members of church, how could such a consensus on self-understanding, shared mission or pastoral strategies be attained? And how was the resulting action to be co-ordinated? Some responses to these challenges will be traced briefly in this section.

Vatican II placed renewed emphasis on this truth: the social context of the Christian community, i.e. the circumstances and conditions of life (political, economic and cultural) of members of the community and of their world, form inescapably the medium of their conversation and communion with one another and with God, their milieu for being church. At the time of the Council the context of the church in the Western or 'developed' countries had been, for a good two hundred years, a progressively modernised society with all that this entailed. Life had become 'national', more and more rationally constructed, bureaucratically structured, centralised, economically interdependent, technically operated and even controlled, and socially individualised and polarised. The church's response had been largely one of retreat. Loss of control of systems ('secularisation') had dislodged it from the familiar starting points. In terms of Ziebertz's analysis¹⁰¹ the church carried on its mission on the assumption of a basic discontinuity between religion and modernity. Vatican II challenged this stance. Catholics were called to enter into dialogue with their world. This, it has been argued, they can do most immediately and effectively in their local, parochial setting. They were reminded of the need to find expressions of their faith in the idiom and within the structures of their community and society, and in particular to address the depersonalising and marginalising forces at work there.

In so-called 'Third World' settings of the church the social context was and is

¹⁰¹ See p. 57 above.

characterised by gross inequalities. Ownership of land, control of natural resources and command of capital are held by small minorities, mainly as consequences of colonisation which was not only an invasion of place and property but also of culture. In the decade before Vatican II, the Catholic church in Latin America (the church of the vast majority of the people, at least sociologically) was already in the throes of social and political change sweeping the continent – such as mass migration to the cities without corresponding social or industrial planning, a new phase of cultural invasion through the mass media, some economic development which only served to widen the gap between rich and poor, and rule by military *juntas*. Vatican II validated the solidarity and critical reappraisal of mission which was beginning in the Latin American church (CELAM, the Latin American Episcopal Council had been established in 1955) and gave impetus to its orientation towards the work of justice at all levels. In Asia and Africa social and political transformations were also taking place at the time of the Council. On these continents, however, church presence and influence were comparatively weak.

Episcopal Conferences must not be considered the only expressions of local church.¹⁰² Nevertheless, what happened at episcopal level in the churches of Latin America, Africa and Asia, Europe and America after Vatican II are significant aspects of the reception of the Council. While a conference of the bishops of Latin America already existed, the Medellín Conference of the Latin American bishops in 1968 had a ‘paradigmatic character’ for the implementation of the Council’s commission to the church.¹⁰³ There, the Council’s theology of the church and their own contemporary social contexts were taken as twin foci of the effort to read and

¹⁰² Nocent, ‘The Local Church as Realization of the Church of Christ and Subject of the Eucharist’, [‘Realization’], *Reception*, p. 224.

¹⁰³ ‘Realization’, p. 82.

receive Vatican II.

Medellín revealed the degree to which the self-realization of local churches is always a hermeneutical achievement, in which text and context, word and situation, are brought together in an interpretative unity in which each both illumines and is illumined. The reception of Vatican II thus becomes for each local church the same act of self-examination and self-purification that the Council represented for the universal church.¹⁰⁴

The post-Vatican II meeting of the Asian bishops took place in Manila in 1970. (They had already held a meeting as early as 1958). In 1969 the first pan-African Symposium of Bishops took place at Kampala. From the Asian and African conferences there followed a series of assemblies, which continued to grapple with the task of taking seriously for their own situations the implications of the Council's ecclesiology.

Efforts by the 'young churches' to inculturate the Christian heritage in a truly catholic spirit are faced with these challenges: how to distil the essence of the message from Western constructs of thought as well as cultural and even moral norms; how sacramental theology might take cognisance of the significant elements of indigenous traditions – religious and popular; how to facilitate the development of a 'church from below' through appropriate forms of ecclesial life and ministry; how to give expression to the incarnational and liberatory nature of Christianity by their participation in political and economic struggles. The process of inculturation is mandated by the Council:

The Christian life will be adapted to the genius and character of every culture, and particular traditions, along with the distinctive gifts of every family of nations, will be illumined by the gospel and taken up into the catholic unity. Thus, new particular churches, with their own traditions, will take their place in the communion of the church.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ 'Realization', p. 83.

¹⁰⁵ AG 22. It is important to note that the clear distinction is not made in the documents between local realisations of the Church catholic, and local churches which are autonomous in nature. The meaning of *ecclesiae particulares* is open to interpretation either way.

The Vatican II view of an inculturated church was ‘something like a Copernican revolution in ecclesiology’.¹⁰⁶ While the hazards of excessive syncretism are to be avoided, the Council marked a definite movement away from a centuries-old expectation of uniform compliance with a centralised Roman institution by its commission to the [Catholic] churches of the world to realise themselves in terms of their own social settings. Thus, the idea of a single normative culture was abandoned, and the incarnation of Catholic Christianity in the diverse world cultures was called for by the Council.¹⁰⁷ This call to relevance challenges the church in its most local realisations to *be* truly church. Through experience of grappling with the processes of inculturation, the representatives of the young churches have impacted, if not always to the degree desired or expected, on the Synods of Bishops held in Rome from 1969 onwards.¹⁰⁸ The dialectical nature of inculturation will be discussed in the next chapter. The on-going response of Rome to the development of the regional churches will be reviewed after the reception of Vatican II in ‘First World’ churches has been discussed.

In Western, Euro-American contexts the church after Vatican II was faced with the challenge of entering into dialogue with the modern society within which it was to fulfil its mission. The Council had given impetus to a movement in the relationship of church to world, from suspicion to conversation. But in the late 1960s the structures of Western society, its legitimations, its hegemony and its sense of its historical destiny were severely questioned by young people, by the emerging nationalist movements of the colonies, by immigrants and by many within the society

¹⁰⁶ Komonchak, ‘Local Realization’, p. 78.

¹⁰⁷ cf. Komonchak, ‘Local Realization’, p. 81.

¹⁰⁸ See Kerkhoffs, *Concilium*, 86/6, p. 47-52 for detailed analysis of the composition of the Synod of 1985, and a contrast with the Council.

itself.¹⁰⁹ The optimism which was prevalent at the time of the Council faded quickly.

In many areas of the Christian life changes were initiated with varying degrees of depth and effectiveness: liturgical adaptations, lay participation in ministry, structures for sharing responsibility within church, for ecumenical dialogue, and for a development of Catholic Action into social responsibility as a Christian duty. With these changes came also new awareness resulting, for example, in pressure for the inclusion of women in all aspects of church life, increased respect for individual freedom and for personal spiritual experience. In this context, it was to be expected that issues which were highly significant for Christians in their personal and social lives, such as church teaching on divorce and contraception (to which may now be added issues in bio-ethics), the Catholic church's position in relation to ecumenism, and the question of intercommunion would arise.¹¹⁰ In a time of much turbulence in both society and church and in their inter-relations it is difficult to trace definitively any lines of cause and effect. Komonchak observes that this situation has given rise to two great temptations both of which contain, at least implicitly, severe criticisms of Vatican II: the first is to retreat to the former 'distinct sociological form that was Roman Catholicism' (before the Council); the second is to allow the world (society and culture) with all its ambivalence to set the agenda for the church. When the latter stance is taken in the name of Vatican II, then the Council stands accused of a 'too eager détente with a now suspect economic and political order'.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ See *The Irish Times: Weekend Supplement*, 9 May 1998 for commentaries on 1968, 30 years on.

¹¹⁰ cf. The outcome of the National Pastoral Assembly in England (1980) However, expectations that the concerns and needs of the faithful might influence official Church positions on such key issues were unrealistic. When Pope John Paul visited England in 1982, he endorsed the work of the Assembly. It was, therefore, a matter of deep disappointment that no member of the laity involved in the processes of the Assembly was given access to discussions during his stay, despite the fact that the visit was a response to the report of the Assembly presented by the English bishops. M.P. Hornsby-Smith, *Roman Catholics in England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p.42.

¹¹¹ *Local Realization*, p. 87.

As a result of the complexity of the situation, efforts to implement the teaching of Vatican II in the Euro-American church have been uneven. The discussions of the bishops at the 1985 Synod provide a snapshot of developments. The 'synodalisation' of the church in Germany was a serious attempt to establish structures for dialogue and collaboration. The desire, on the part of some of the German bishops, for a return to the sense of church as *mysterium* was justified by them on the basis of their claim that bureaucracy was depersonalising the church.¹¹² One of the advocates of this position criticised 'the many who put their hope in altering structures and conditions, whereas the church's real renewal consists in changing of hearts and in people turning to God'.¹¹³ Pottmeyer remarks on the contrast between the German bishops and their counterparts from the English-speaking world and the 'Third World'. He observes the emphasis placed by Cardinal Hume on 'the concept of *communio* as an ecclesiological category, its pastoral significance in a changing society and its structural consequences; *communio*-structures should be further developed at all levels of church life'.¹¹⁴

Pottmeyer himself acknowledges the need for a fresh sense of the spirituality of renewal. The use by the Synod of the concept of mystery to characterise the church is, he observes, faithful to *Lumen gentium* and the Council.¹¹⁵ However, he questions seriously whether the attitude of the Synod to the impact of its contemporary society on the church is equally true to *Gaudium et spes*. The development of *communio*-structures is not simply 'an emanation of autonomistic

¹¹² See 'The Church as Mysterium and as Institution ['Mysterium'], *Concilium*, 1986/6, p. 99-109. "...The ecclesiastical apparatus obscures the Church as *mysterium*. That is why so many young people leave the Church and go to the sects which flourish among the young". This is Cardinal Meisne's analysis'. 'Mysterium', p.100. "It is essential ... to put forward the Church as *mysterium*, transcending itself towards Christ. The synod cannot make the distribution of power its primary topic". - Cardinal Ratzinger, quoted in 'Mysterium', p. 100.

¹¹³ Cardinal Hoffner, quoted by Pottmeyer, 'Mysterium', p. 100.

¹¹⁴ 'Mysterium', p. 101.

¹¹⁵ 'Mysterium', p. 101.

emancipation'; rather is it an essential element, together with the holiness of its members, in the church's witness in a modern world.¹¹⁶ In effect Pottmeyer argues that *communio*-structures do not, of themselves, threaten unity, even while addressing issues of power. Neither does a theology of church as mystery remove the obligation that the 'visible form and organisation of the church correspond to its ground and life-principle, i.e. the mystery of the triune God, the mystery of Jesus Christ and the mystery of the Spirit's working'.¹¹⁷ He bases his view on positions taken at Vatican II: 'For the Council ... there is the closest possible relationship between the church as *mysterium-sacrament* and the church as *communio*.'¹¹⁸

Liberation Theology as developed in Latin America has certainly had an impact in the developed world also, at both theoretical and practical levels. The consultation processes initiated by the bishops of the United States, for example, and their subsequent pronouncements on land ownership, the economy and nuclear weapons, were seen as studied and courageous commentaries, and spurred other local churches to engage with their social reality. In many places Christian groups, notably religious women and men and their associates, have opted to align themselves with communities on the margins of their societies.

5.4.2 Developments in Rome since Vatican II

When Paul VI published the encyclicals *Sacerdotalis caelibatus* (1967)¹¹⁹ and *Humanae vitae* (1968)¹²⁰ he was following up on subjects withdrawn from debate at the Council, the ordination of married men and birth control. Both the content and

¹¹⁶ 'Mysterium', pp. 102-103.

¹¹⁷ 'Mysterium', p. 104.

¹¹⁸ 'Mysterium', p. 104.

¹¹⁹ AAS 59, 1967, pp. 657-697.

¹²⁰ AAS 60, 1968, pp. 481-503.

the manner in which these documents were published were at odds with the climate after Vatican II, and their reception, especially that of *Humanae vitae*, was contentious.¹²¹ Paul VI did, nonetheless, encourage the Episcopal Conferences in their work, and took seriously the role of the Synods of Bishops as an exercise of collegiality. However, a growing retrenchment of this movement can be observed throughout the present pontificate. As J. O. Beozzo observes:

... the most important piece of recent legislation, the new Code of Canon Law, promulgated in 1983, was not submitted for final approval or scrutiny by a representative body of bishops such as an Extraordinary Synod.¹²²

The New Code retains a basically clerical conception of the church, and while recognising the value of consultation with the laity through structures designed for the purpose, does little to further the development of church as community. While basic ecclesial communities were explicitly recommended by Medellín and later recognised by *Evangelii nuntiandi*¹²³ (1975) of Paul VI, they received no recognition in the Code.¹²⁴ Some bishops in their dioceses have tried to restructure the church in their area to reflect the self-understanding that evolved during the Council, but it is nevertheless true that serious canonical change has not taken place in the Roman church.

The process by which Roman authorities appoint bishops to the dioceses of the world is arguably inconsistent with the Council's theology of the episcopate and of the local church, and makes the teaching and living-out of that theology very difficult. By contrast with this situation, the involvement of the community of believers in the process of appointments, which was upheld by Ignatius of Antioch,

¹²¹ This fact has already been referred to in relation to the Irish context in Chapter 1, p. 31.above.

¹²² 'The Future of Particular Churches' ['Future'], *Concilium*, 1999/1, p. 130.

¹²³ AAS 68 (1976), pp. 5-76.

¹²⁴ cf. Beozzo, 'Future', p. 135.

Irenaeus of Lyons and Cyprian of Carthage, was discussed in chapter 4.¹²⁵ In the present situation within the Roman Catholic tradition it is unavoidable that the bishop appears to many in the diocese as little more than the delegate of the Pope – a misunderstanding that has far-reaching implications.¹²⁶

Beozzo draws attention to other documents promulgated by Roman authorities, e.g. on lay ministries, published by sixteen bishops from eight Congregations /Pontifical Councils. The document was highly clerical in tone, despite its acknowledgement that:

The source of the call addressed to all member of the Mystical Body to participate actively in the mission and edification of the People of God, is to be found in the mystery of the church.¹²⁷

The Apostolic Letter of John Paul II on bishops' conferences was also notable for the manner in which it effectively disempowered them¹²⁸ and restored a centralised role for the papacy that was characteristic of the Roman Catholic church before Vatican II. C. Theobald, also, in discussing the publication by the Congregation for the

¹²⁵ See pp. 140-141 above.

¹²⁶ Many religious orders have developed approaches to decision-making which are based on the Ignatian concept of discernment. The process begins with structured reflection on personal and communal histories with their 'light and dark' sides. It moves through reconciliation towards renewal of intention to seek only what God wills i.e. the outcome which will best serve the kingdom of God. Following this there is a thorough gathering of the data relating to the issue in question. Advantages and disadvantages of adopting or not adopting the course of action in question are enumerated, considered in prayer, and the outcomes are shared. In time, it is expected that a consensus emerges, and this too is 'tested' through discernment. Theologically, the process is premised on the activity of the Spirit in the members and in the group, the reality of sin which must be renounced in order to allow the Spirit to lead, and the necessity to 'read the signs' which indicate the way forward. Practically, the process engenders a strong sense of corporateness as a community in faith and in the Spirit, and a willingness to accept the outcome, e.g. the appointment of a member to a role of leadership/administration. This process is presented in detail, in the context of its community-building potential, by John English, in *Spiritual Intimacy and Community: an Ignatian View of the Small Faith Community*, NY Mahwah: Paulist Press: 1992.

¹²⁷ 'Instruction Concerning Certain Questions Relating to the Collaboration of the Lay Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests.' Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997, p.5.

¹²⁸ *Apostolos Suos*, Litterae Apostolicae Motu Proprio Datae, De Theologica et Iuridica Natura Conferentiarum Episcoporum, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998. Unless the positions taken by the Conference has the unanimous agreement of the membership, then authoritative decisions are to be referred to the Pope.

Doctrine of the Faith, *Professio Fidei*,¹²⁹ recognises its retrieval of the text *De magisterio* which was rejected by the Council, and even a reliance on *Humani Generis*.¹³⁰ This ruling was inserted into the new Code of Canon Law in 1998.

The danger in all these tendencies is, as Beozzo rightly identifies it, ‘the atrophy of the local churches ... a uniformity incapable of taking account of today’s cultural diversity ...’.¹³¹ On a more hopeful note, it may be observed that history cannot be undone, the documents of Vatican II give testimony that the most recent teaching of the church in council urges local churches to *be* church in their own historical and cultural settings, while preserving the unity of the church in essentials.

To implement satisfactorily the vision of parish which will be developed in the next chapter a parish needs to have the example and support of its diocese and regional church. Thus for the parish great importance attaches to the efforts around the world by bishops’ conferences to reassess their social context and in that light renew the self-understanding of the church in that place. The importance of regional and diocesan pastoral planning will be discussed in Chapter 7.

There are also factors within the parish itself which determine its response to the challenge of Vatican II. These include the vision and quality of the leadership, its facility with communication and dialogue, and its willingness to structure the life of the parish in accordance with its theological understanding of parish and church.

5.4.3 The Reception of Vatican II in the Irish Church

The Irish church, like Irish society in general, was highly insular up to the late 1950s.

¹²⁹ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, ‘Professio Fidei et Iusurandum Fidelitatis in suscipiendo officio nomine Ecclesiae exercendo.’ AAS 81 (1989), pp.104-106. See C. Theobald, ‘The “Definitive” Discourse of the Magisterium: Why be Afraid of a Creative Reception?’, *Concilium*, 1999/1, pp. 60 – 69.

¹³⁰ Encyclical of Pius XII upholding the traditional teaching of the Church on revelation. AAS 42 (1950), pp. 561-578.

¹³¹ ‘Future’ p. 132.

As Seán Freyne observes, ‘... the questions the Council sought to grapple with had never been seriously posed in this country’.¹³² Seán Mac Réamoinn observes that the Catholic church in Ireland remained largely untouched by the ‘ferment of ideas, already burgeoning in the 1930s, which had a wide influence on pastoral as well as intellectual life [in Europe]’¹³³

Many factors combined to make the reception of Vatican II in Ireland a slow and difficult process. The historical background of Catholicism of the sixties has already been outlined in Part 1, as has its numerical and cultural dominance in Irish society of the day. The economic and political situation had just begun to develop with the Programme for Economic Expansion. The rapidity of social change that followed has also been discussed. The critique of the role of the church in Irish society, which inevitably ensued, was accompanied by much internal questioning. Changing patterns of belief and practice in the decades since the Council have been traced and discussed in chapter 3. How much of the change is related to social transformations, how much due to lack of *aggiornamento* in the Irish church, and how much is a result (as some would say) of a loss of direction within the church is difficult to unravel, given the simultaneity and mutual inclusiveness of these processes. The twin temptations – restoration or *détente* - identified by Komonchak were, and still are evident in the Irish context.

The bishops of Ireland were not notable at the Second Vatican Council for any spearheading of renewal. Nevertheless some change was initiated in all dioceses. From the beginning the work of Vatican II was disseminated in Ireland, as

¹³² *Church and Change: the Irish Experience*, Hans Kung, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986. Introduction, p. 10.

¹³³ ‘Renewal or Revision’ *Freedom to Hope? The Catholic Church in Ireland Twenty Years after Vatican II*, A. Falconer, E. McDonagh, S. Mac Réamoinn (eds.), Dublin: Columba Press, 1985, p. 7-8. Mac Réamoinn notes that in 1955 the Irish bishops are on record as seeking exemption from implementing the revised rites of the Easter Triduum. They were refused. p. 8.

elsewhere, through the religious press¹³⁴ and in the media generally. A considerable influence in raising an awareness in Ireland of the Council's teaching was the eagerness with which the religious orders (especially women's congregations) took up the mandate of the Council in *Perfectae caritatis* to renew and adapt their lifestyles and ministries to the modern social settings in which they found themselves. Given the proportionately high number of religious women and men in the Irish church of the day and the level of their involvement in the society through education, health and social services, the influence of their study of and response to the Council was very significant.¹³⁵

In the Irish church as a whole the area in which change occurred most immediately was that of the Liturgy. Mac Réamoinn discusses both the positive and negative aspects of the change. Of course, there were the obvious benefits of greater accessibility to the people through the use of the vernacular and the introduction of lay ministries. church buildings were re-ordered in accordance with the requirements of the new liturgy. The New Rites for sacramental celebrations were introduced as they were published. However, the individualism which characterised the liturgy in the pre-Vatican II church was not, and has not yet been addressed. Many observe the loss of a certain sense of mystery and aesthetic quality in present-day liturgy. The isolation of worship from Christian living is also notable – language and symbols are not immediately accessible, and little creativity is shown, in general, in bridging the communication gap.¹³⁶ A deep renewal, both theological and practical, within church communities was needed, for reasons which have become evident in Part 1 of this dissertation. On the whole, it is true to say that this is still the case.

¹³⁴ Two publications of note had already been established, namely *The Furrow* and *Doctrine and Life*.

¹³⁵ See M. MacCurtain and N. Kinsella, 'Sisters and Brothers', *Freedom to Hope*, pp. 39-55.

¹³⁶ Mac Réamoinn, *Renewal or Revision*, pp. 5-16.

The neglect of education in faith for adult lay people in Ireland has already been discussed. The historian Joe Lee comments on the absence of debate in Catholic church circles throughout the period of consolidation of church presence and practice in Irish society. What was missing, in his view, is any scope for loyal dissent.¹³⁷ While this situation is changing, the absence of ongoing faith development among the majority of Irish Catholics is a serious impediment to the reception of Vatican II. Regardless of how clear the content and paradigm of Vatican II may be, if they are not known or explored they cannot impact on church life and practice.

In recent years some dioceses have carried out social analysis and/or held assemblies representative of the total community.¹³⁸ Many initiatives have been undertaken, and all dioceses have invested in renewal of personnel and expansion of pastoral practice. Nevertheless, there has been neither significant pastoral planning nor concerted practical initiative within the Catholic church in Ireland as a whole over the last four decades. In 1997 the Annual Conference of the National Council of Priests of Ireland (NCPI) discussed the prospects for a national Assembly of the Irish church, and launched a process of exploration of the idea. It was decided in 1998 not to promote the idea at present. In their view there is still need for initial ground-work at more local levels.¹³⁹

The *work of justice*, has been a concern of the bishops and of the religious orders.¹⁴⁰ The issue of peace-making in Northern Ireland, in a conflict with deep 'Christian' associations is a matter of grave concern. Catholic Bishops and clergy

¹³⁷ J. Lee, Paper delivered at the Conference 'Our Society in the New Millenium, Are We Forgetting Something?' Rural Resources Development, Ennis, October 1998. Transcript 'A Sense of Place in the Celtic Tiger?' in *Are We Forgetting Something? Our Society in the New Millenium*, H. Bohan and G. Kennedy (eds.), Dublin: Veritas, 1999.

¹³⁸ e.g. Waterford, Limerick, Cashel

¹³⁹ NCPI Bulletin, Autumn 1998.

¹⁴⁰ Bishops' Pastoral Letter, 1977. The Conference of Religious of Ireland (Justice Desk) continually monitors and takes part in the processes of social policy and planning. John Whyte claims that the

have been actively supporting negotiation, but leadership of the Catholic communities most directly involved in areas of conflict has not been remarkable or effective – with some honourable individual exceptions. Finally, the work of ecumenical development in Ireland has been chequered. While initiatives such as the Inter-church Meeting (Between the Irish Council of churches and the Roman Catholic church) have held promise, progress has not been as steady as would be hoped. The recent break-down in the process towards an inclusive body was a setback. At the level of dioceses events such as church Unity week each January are generally observed through shared, formal liturgical services. These are not often followed up with discussion or shared projects. In parishes the situation varies with the local circumstances.

Michel Peillon explained the growth in strength of the Irish church through the hundred years from 1850 to 1950, as in part a function of presence of both hierarchy and congregations of religious, with their different orientations and modes of presence and ministry.¹⁴¹ It is possible that through these agencies (which are still present) relevant ways of being church informed by the teaching of Vatican II, may yet be developed. It is an argument of this dissertation that the Christian communities in parishes throughout the country, as the ‘primary, normal form’ of church are where new vision and praxis can take root.

5.5 THE LOCAL CHURCH IN ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

In his convocation of the Second Vatican Council Pope John XXIII acknowledged

hierarchy as a body could by the 1970s be classified as left of centre, in his second edition of *Church and State in Modern Ireland, 1923-1979*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, p. 395.

¹⁴¹ *Contemporary Irish Society: an Introduction*, p.90. It was customary to posit the institution-charism dialectic as the basis of differences between the nature and *modus operandi* of clergy and religious e.g. Ladislaus Orsy, *Open to the Spirit, Religious Life after Vatican II*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968. There is, in reality, a need to recognise the elements of both institution and charism in both hierarchy and religious congregations.

the time as one of 'generous and growing efforts which are made in different parts for the purpose of rebuilding [the] visible unity of all Christians'.¹⁴² He therefore set out an objective that 'the forthcoming Council should provide premises of doctrinal clarity and of mutual charity' to nourish the desire for unity and further its progress.¹⁴³ From the outset, one of the main purposes of the Council was to 'work actively so that there may be fulfilled the great mystery of unity ...'.¹⁴⁴

The obligation to hold continuity and change in a productive tension, while being dedicated to the work of unity, is recognised by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1973,¹⁴⁵ and also by Pope John Paul II in 1980 in his address to the members of ARCIC 1:

Your method has been to go behind the habit of thought and expression born and nourished in enmity and controversy, to scrutinise together the great common treasure, to clothe it in a language at once traditional and expressive of the insights of an age which no longer glories in strife but seeks to come together in listening to the quiet voice of the Spirit.¹⁴⁶

When the Council declared its understanding of the church of Christ as 'subsisting' in the Catholic church, it also affirmed that, in its view, 'many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside of her visible structure'.¹⁴⁷ Thus, the way was open to a genuine dialogue with non-Roman Catholic Christian churches and ecclesial communities in a way that was new. This dialogue, while

¹⁴² Pope John XXIII, 'Humani Salutis', *Documents*, p. 706.

¹⁴³ *Documents*, p. 706.

¹⁴⁴ 'Pope John's Opening Speech to the Council', *Documents*, p. 717.

¹⁴⁵ 'It sometimes happens that some dogmatic truth is first expressed incompletely (but not falsely), and at a later date, when considered in a broader context of faith or human knowledge, it receives a fuller and more perfect expression', *Mysterium ecclesiae* 5, AAS 65 (1973) pp. 402-3.

¹⁴⁶ *One in Christ* 16 (1980) p. 341. Writing in 1994, however, Francis Sullivan observes the disparity between the participation of Rome in ecumenical dialogue with 'Oriental Orthodox' churches and its response to the report of Anglican-Roman Catholic discussions, ARCIC 1. In fact, Sullivan expresses the view that, to the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church, closer communion with Anglican churches could constitute a threat to the seemingly more desirable unity of East-West. In particular, he is of the opinion that the decision of many Anglican churches to ordain women constitutes, to Rome, a major obstacle, in view of the stance of the Eastern Churches on the issue. *Milltown Studies* (34) 1994, pp. 13-30.

¹⁴⁷ *LG* 8.

avoiding compromise on Catholic doctrine, should nevertheless proceed on the basis that 'in Catholic teaching there exists an order or "hierarchy" of truths, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith'.¹⁴⁸

Whether the dialogue is with Orthodox churches not canonically united with Rome, other Eastern-rite churches, or Western Protestant churches or ecclesial communities of post-reformation origin, it is arguable that how the reality of the local church is interpreted is an important key to understanding the division and hence to the dialogue. S. J. Kilian claims that '... the very concept of the unity of the church depends greatly on the ... perception of the nature of the particular churches.'¹⁴⁹

In the context of his assessment in 1999 of future prospects for what was set in motion by Vatican II, José Oscar Beozzo observes:

The value of particular churches and the conciliarity (synodality) of the church lies at the heart of the Orthodox tradition; the local assembly is an element that was revalued by the Protestant Reformation, given lively expression in the Congregationalist churches and taken to extremes by the Baptists. The reforms of Vatican II went back to some of these elements, emphasizing the importance of the local church and giving greater importance to collegial elements in the life of the Catholic church. These are central features in ecumenical dialogue and drawing-together and communion among the Christian churches.¹⁵⁰

John Zizioulas sees the Eastern Ecclesiology centred on the particular church. He identifies the threat to the cohesiveness of the church to which this has given rise, and looks to the West for complementary models to enrich the quality and experience of communion.¹⁵¹ The history of ecclesiology in the Roman Catholic tradition before

¹⁴⁸ UR 11.

¹⁴⁹ Sabbas J. Kilian, 'The Meaning and Nature of the Local Church' *CTSA* (35), p. 254.

¹⁵⁰ Beozzo, 'Documentation: The Future of Particular Churches', *Concilium* 1999/1, p. 124.

¹⁵¹ J. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, New York: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1985, p.25.

Vatican II is testimony to its highly-centralised character, which led to a largely administrative view of the local churches. The renewed emphasis on the theological foundation of local churches, especially diocesan communities in communion with their bishop, restores to Western Ecclesiology a basis for a communion between the local churches and the 'Apostolic See' which is vastly richer than a relationship which is primarily juridical. Thus, in recognising the complementarity between their respective understanding of the local church, a new basis for dialogue emerges.

In Reformation theology the local church is emphasised as existing not just *in* but *for* its own place, thus highlighting the need for its language, worship and style to be understandable and relevant.¹⁵² The attendant danger is fragmentation. Within the Catholic tradition it can be said that the stable unity of the church has been purchased largely at the expense of the local church's sense of itself as an ecclesial community. The renewed perspective offered by Vatican II opens avenues for dialogue which, certainly at the level of local congregations, has been mutually enriching.¹⁵³

5.6 CONCLUSION

There can be little question that Vatican II was a milestone in the development of ecclesiology in the Roman Catholic tradition, representing as it did a retrieval (through its return to its biblical and patristic sources) of much of the self-understanding of the church as primarily a community of believers, and also (by its call to all to read the signs of the times) new departures in the relationship of the

¹⁵² Kilian, 'The Meaning and Nature of the Local Church', *CTSA* (35), 1980, p. 253.

¹⁵³ e.g. In 1996 The Council of Churches of Britain and Ireland, through its Commission on Mission, launched a research project entitled *Building Bridges of Hope*. Through a process of action-research, they are studying the dynamics of developing congregations for mission within 24 congregations representing all the main Christian churches in four countries (Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales). Interim reports on the project indicate that many insights will be gained. A Draft Final Report has been published (2000) in London by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland.

church to its concrete social environment. The renewed emphasis placed by the Council on the local church marked a new era within Roman Catholicism – the era of the ‘world church’ whose catholicity arises precisely from its inculturation, while preserving its communion within the universal church, in particular times and places.

The reception and implementation of the Council have been marked by both enthusiasm and resistance at all levels within the church. In view of the history of the its self-understanding and of its engagement with the ‘world’ in the centuries prior to Vatican II it is clear that the paradigmatic shifts which the Council represents could only take root with time and effort, just as the process of the Council was itself characterised by struggle. This dissertation has been undertaken in the conviction that the full riches of the Council’s teaching have yet to be appropriated by the communities of believers, especially in their most immediate church contexts which are the parishes.

It is to a theology of the parish which, I will claim, lies implicitly in the ecclesiology of Vatican II that I will now direct my attention.

Chapter 6

THEOLOGY OF THE LIFE AND MISSION OF THE PARISH COMMUNITY IN THE LIGHT OF VATICAN II

The theology of the local church, which was developed in Vatican II, was examined in chapter 5. The 'rediscovery' of parish in the Catholic tradition during the early decades of this century, as pointed up for instance in the theology of Karl Rahner, was also referred to. In this chapter I will use the understanding in Vatican II of the 'local' or 'particular' church as the basis for a theologically rich and practically dynamic vision of the parish in its local context.

It will be necessary at the outset to discuss the hermeneutical issues involved in interpreting Vatican II and its relation to the ongoing development of the church's self-understanding and practice. To this end I will first consider the nature of the Council, how it has so far been read, what options are open to those interpreting it, and what is an appropriate hermeneutic. The Council marked a watershed in the history of Catholic ecclesiology, not least for its stance on the need for church communities around the world to take seriously the diverse cultural contexts in which they belong. The relationship of the church to the world, as has been repeatedly observed throughout the historical analyses of, and theological reflections on the early Christian communities, is a subject of ongoing polemic within theology. I will take up the inculturation debate by setting over against the Vatican II position the view that the church must always be distinctive within its cultural context. With J.B Metz I will argue that 'there is no such thing as a Christianity existing prior to culture and history', and that without a critical awareness of the need for intercultural dialogue, the church will continue to engage in 'a monocultural colonisation of the souls of [non-European] peoples and cultures [even if it does so] by less

drastic means than in previous epochs of church history'.¹

I will then read again the Council's theology of the local church, using the hermeneutical approach as put forward in section one and the argument for authentic inculturation in section two, in search of a theological and practical vision of the parish as it exists within the local church which is the diocese. I will claim, with Rahner, that the community of believers in the parish, especially as they gather to celebrate Eucharist, is a realisation of the universal church in time and place. While the essential, canonical relationship of the parish to the bishop and the diocese will be recognised, this will be placed in the context of a relationship of *communio*, i.e. an understanding of the church as the community of those who share (equally) the Christian faith and mission.² As the church actualised in time and place, the parish must to the limits of its own capacity, and in communion with the diocese and the church universal, bear the marks of the church of Christ, namely unity and apostolicity, catholicity and holiness, and the Christian community of the parish must be a living locus of *koinonia*, *martyria*, *leitourgia*, and *diakonia*. Thus, the closing section of this chapter will draw the theological study of Part II of the dissertation to its conclusion, and point the way to the guidelines for *praxis*, which will comprise Part III.

¹ J.B.Metz, 'Unity and Diversity: Problems and Prospects for Inculturation', in *Concilium* 204, (4/1989), p. 81.

² The *Nota explicativa praevia* to the third chapter of *Lumen gentium* present *communio* as 'an organic reality which demands a juridical form and is simultaneously animated by charity'. *Documents*, p.99. *AG 15* directs missionaries to 'raise up communities of the faithful [to] carry out the priestly, prophetic and royal offices entrusted to them by God'.

6.1 THE INTERPRETATION OF VATICAN II – HERMENEUTICAL ISSUES

6.1.1 The Nature of the Council and its Impact on Interpretation

The starting point in any approach to the interpretation of Vatican II must be a discussion, however brief, of the nature of the Council itself. It has already been observed that, unlike other councils in the history of the church, Vatican II was not faced with issues of internal doctrinal disagreement. The absence of a focusing doctrinal question may seem to leave the task of interpretation somewhat anchorless. When Pope John XXIII announced his intention to convene the twenty-first ecumenical council he indicated that he was initiating new movements in three areas: a movement within the Roman Catholic Church towards renewal of its life; a movement between the Roman Catholic Church and the other Christian churches towards unity; and a movement between the church and the world leading to fulfilment by the church of its mission. He indicated that burning questions arising from the modern age had contributed to his readiness for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which he firmly believed lay behind his decision.³

The second Vatican Council was very deliberately *pastoral* in character: in its inspiration, its processes and its outcome (documents). Thus, interpretation of the Council must at all times reflect its pastoral nature. It must not be imagined, however, that ‘pastoral’ here is a category separate from and unrelated to ‘doctrinal’. On the contrary, the pastoral concerns of the Council raised for consideration all the major doctrinal themes in Catholic teaching. The challenge to the Council was to present the church’s belief in its contemporary social context and to do so in terms of the current social reality.

The membership of the Council must always be kept in mind in the search for a defensible reading of its documents. The evolution of ‘progressive’ and

'conservative' sections of the hierarchy during the period between the announcing of Vatican II and its actual opening have been traced.⁴ Certainly the history of the Council itself represents a struggle between those defending post-Tridentine understandings of the church and its mission, and those influenced by the renewal movements of early twentieth-century Catholic theology. Reading the Council documents without an awareness and acknowledgement of the dynamic at work within the Council and a theological understanding of the significance of that dynamic will not produce a fruitful interpretation.

The nature of the Council texts as 'compromise' documents is evident. In Chapter 5 an attempt was made to mediate between the presentation of the church as sacrament and mystery on the one hand and as a hierarchically-structured organisation on the other. What must be emphasised here is that the Council's method of juxtaposition, whereby polarities such as charism and institution are reflected without being fully harmonised, is much more than tactical. Of course it is true that agreement on each document as a whole would not have been reached in the context of the Council unless progressive and conservative stances were represented in them. But the realities with which the Council was concerned, and especially the evolving understanding of them through time are, according to Pottmeyer, characterised by the complexity which is indicated in the texts. Mediation between inevitable polarities he sees as the task of interpretation through theological reflection and ecclesial praxis⁵.

³ cf. 'Pope John's Opening Speech to the Council', *Documents* p. 712.

⁴ cf. G. Alberigo and J.A. Komonchak (eds.) *History of Vatican II*, Vol 1, New York, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995. While 'progressive' and 'conservative' may be seen as political terms, they do characterise positions of Council Fathers, insofar as they pursued their ideas with a view to their being implemented in practice. Schillebeeckx suggests 'essentialist' and 'existentialist' as alternatives. *Vatican II: the Struggle of Minds and other essays*, Dublin: Gill and Son, 1963, pp. 7-11.

⁵ cf. Pottmeyer, 'A New Phase in the Reception of Vatican II: Twenty Years of Interpretation of the Council', ['A New Phase'], *Reception*, pp. 38-39.

Finally, as Pottmeyer has argued, interpretation of Vatican II is greatly facilitated by keeping in mind the ‘transitional’ nature of the Council.⁶ There can be no doubt that, while Vatican II came out of the historical evolution of the Roman Catholic tradition, and remained within it, the self-presentation of that church in the documents of the Council marks very significant departures from its position during the previous three centuries at least. It follows that even its final statements, be they constitutions, decrees or declarations, must not be interrogated for definitive formulations either on doctrinal questions or pastoral practice, but as pointers or signs of the struggle of the church to understand itself and its mission anew, faced as it is with the challenges of modernity.

Before addressing the question of what can legitimately be asked of the texts of Vatican II the responses to the Council which were in evidence at least during the twenty or so years after it closed, will be discussed briefly but critically. These responses point to the need for a thoroughly-constructed hermeneutic for interpreting the message of the Council.

6.1.2 Responses to Vatican II: Interpretation during the First Twenty Years.

Given that Vatican II did not either in its discussions or its documents espouse exclusively one or the other pole of the progressive-conservative continuum, it was easy (especially in the more immediate aftermath) for advocates of all positions to quote the Council in favour of their own stance. Thus, for instance, those for whom the church was primarily a community whose members share in the self-communication of God through Jesus Christ could claim that the opening chapters of *Lumen gentium* endorsed their understanding. On the other hand those who saw the church first and before all as an organisation whose hierarchical structure offered,

⁶ ‘A New Phase’, pp. 27-53.

exclusively, the way to and means of attaining salvation, could point to chapter 3 as the pivotal teaching around which other elements of the Council's ecclesiology would fall into place. This scenario, which Pottmeyer and others decry as 'selective interpretation'⁷ highlighted the need for a hermeneutic of the Council which would be in keeping with its true spirit, i.e. a dialogical search at both theological and practical levels for a wider frame of reference within which polemics could be resolved.

At the outset the advocates of 'progressive'⁸ developments entered around the world into a 'phase of excitement'. There was even a danger that the church after Vatican II could have been construed as a 'new' church. Continuity, at least with the church of the previous three centuries was not as evident as the radical breaking out of the 'ossification'⁹ which had characterised that period of the church's history.

The period of 'exuberance' was followed inevitably by a phase of disillusionment for those whose hopes of early transformation of the church in all its dimensions had been high. The Council may in fact be judged by history as a milestone of monumental significance, but the process of integrating the Council's teaching into the historically-developing self-understanding of the church was slow. Vatican II can be said to have endorsed the movement within Catholicism of retrieval of early tradition which was underway through biblical, patristic, pastoral and liturgical renewal. But it also recognised the teaching of Trent and Vatican 1. To those most influenced by the juridical orientation of these Councils the phase of 'disillusionment' represented a return to truth. Twenty years after Vatican II the

⁷ 'A New Phase' p. 37.

⁸ There is an irony about these designations, when it is understood that the so-called 'conservatives' were in the main holding to positions which were true to the more recent centuries (since Trent), and the 'progressives' on the other hand were advocating return to biblical and patristic understandings.

⁹ The term is used by Congar, 'Reception as an Ecclesiological Reality', *Concilium* 1972/7, p. 39.

elements of a hermeneutic which would take account of these realities were being developed.

When John Paul II convened the Synod of Bishops in 1985 its purpose was not to affirm or reject the Council, but rather to address the question of how to interpret it. Before reviewing the contribution of the Synod, however, a closer look will be taken at what options are available in relation to the task of interpretation. Although the Synod's contribution was significant, and was advanced soon afterwards by Walter Kasper, it will be noted that important questions still remained.

6.1.3 Interpreting the Council: Twenty Years Later

The option of a complete rejection of Vatican II has been taken up from the earliest days following the Council,¹⁰ and in more or less vigorous forms it is still encountered today. However, those who aim to minimise the transformations signalled by the Council generally adopt a less 'all-out' approach. The Council, they say, belonged in the mid- 60s and since then much has changed. Indeed before the end of that decade there were social upheavals across the world which marked the end of an era of optimism in the West – the era to which Vatican II belonged. Thus, on this view, what the Council offered as a vision of church and as an understanding of its mission in the world has little or no application beyond its own time. The social and political contexts of church have changed very significantly, be it as a result of the youth revolutions in Europe or America, the taking of political independence by the emerging countries of the Third World, or the economic and social advancement of countries, including Ireland, in the developed world. On this view, also, the role of the church would need to be redrawn in ways different to those put forward by

¹⁰ cf. Ruggieri, 'Towards a Hermeneutic of Vatican II' ['Towards a Hermeneutic'], *Concilium*, 1999/1, p. 2 and n 2.

Vatican II. Often, the restoration of separatist stances, in which the church stands over against 'secularised' society, characterises this position.

Another option is the literal approach which uses the Council documents as proof-texts for selected understandings and courses of action. The negative effect of this way of appropriating the Council is to inhibit a more complete interpretation of the true spirit of Vatican II.

The *Synod of Bishops of 1985*, to which reference has already been made, put forward a comprehensive set of *guidelines*: (1) The documents must be taken as a whole with attention to their interrelatedness; (2) the pastoral character of the Council must not be set against its doctrinal importance; (3) Vatican II must be interpreted within the tradition of the church; and finally (4) the Council must be interrogated by the church in each successive age for guidance in its efforts to relate to its social context. These guidelines, which Avery Dulles describes as 'sane',¹¹ moved forward the task of interpretation. Walter Kasper distinguishes between interpretation of the doctrinal and the pastoral statements, even though he acknowledges the overall pastoral thrust of the Council. His outline of a hermeneutic for the 'doctrinal statements' mirrors those of the Synod - attention to the process of the Council, recognition of the pastoral intention, fidelity to the tradition of the church and living, relevant interpretation in the light of the current situation'.¹² About the Pastoral Constitution, in particular, and the moral questions discussed there he observes that the individual Christian may arrive at a judgement different from that of the church's magisterium, following mature reflection, in a particular situation.¹³

¹¹ 'Catholic Ecclesiology since Vatican II', *Concilium*, 86/6, p. 12.

¹² *Theology and Church*, London: SCM Press, 1989, pp. 172-173.

¹³ *Theology and Church*, p. 175.

Questions to guide the search for an appropriate hermeneutic of Vatican II surface through the above overview: How is the *history* of the Council reflected in the documents (taken as a whole)? In a broader sense how might the *historical nature* of the church influence the reading of Vatican II? What are the hermeneutical implications of the *pastoral* nature of the Council? Is the Council's teaching to be allowed to challenge especially the recent tradition of the church, as well as being interpreted within the tradition as a whole? How is the Council to be a guide for the ongoing questions to the church by societies of the present and the future? It is in attempting to address these questions, drawing mainly on Rahner, that the search for a hermeneutic of the Council will now be pursued.

6.1.4 A Suggested Hermeneutic of Vatican II

Against essentialist understandings of the church, Rahner emphasises that the church exists in history, and history is marked by freedom, choice and change. Rahner viewed history as the sphere where human freedom is exercised, including the human person's freedom to respond or not to respond to God's self-communication.¹⁴ He also observed that history is 'the realm of the provisional, the unfinished, the ambiguous, and dialectical'.¹⁵ Hence, at any point in time, the self-understanding of the church will depend on the characteristics of the age, and also, Rahner holds, on the activity of the Spirit in its history.¹⁶ In his view, the development evident in the Council came about through the activity of the Spirit,¹⁷ but this activity had been operative in the history of the church leading up to the time of the Council – in the

¹⁴ 'History of the World and Salvation History' ['History'], *TI Vol.* v, p. 98.

¹⁵ 'History', p. 97.

¹⁶ 'The history of the Church's faith is still in process of development, and every statement of faith posited in the here and now, and truly posited at that, can be modified and transformed by factors belonging to a future that is still unknown.' 'The New Image of the Church' ['New Image'], *TI Vol.* x, p.5.

¹⁷ 'Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council' [Interpretation], *TI vol.* xx, p.85.

spread of the church beyond Europe, resulting in time in the presence of 'world-church', at least in germ, at the Council. Guisepppe Ruggieri instances the motif of *aggiornamento* as expressing for Pope John XXIII and the Council the imperative of taking history seriously, and of being present in each culture and in each successive age, not in an anachronistic way, but rather in a way which is contemporaneous.¹⁸ In practice, then, the Council must be read in the light of its historical setting, the history of the Council itself, the development of its documents, and also the historical context of the reading community.¹⁹

The second pointer to a hermeneutic of Vatican II, as indicated at the close of the last section, was the pastoral nature of the Council. A perspective on the interrelation of pastoral and doctrinal concerns can be obtained by tracing developments at the Council: its rejection of the schemata produced by the Theological Commissions (predominantly neoscholastic and doctrinal in nature), and its turning to the biblically and patristically-based theologies of the *periti*. Rahner emphasises that the theology of the Council was a theology in transition - he lauds the rigour and exactness of neoscholasticism, but discerns the need for a 'world-theology' to develop which 'will inevitably have to deal with the more urgent questions in a particular cultural group and which are not now the same everywhere'.²⁰ Especially with respect to the coming of a world church Rahner highlights the need 'to have recourse - while invoking the hierarchy of truths, mentioned by Vatican II - to the basic substance of the Christian message'.²¹ He finds the beginnings of what is needed in *GS*: '... in *Gaudium et spes* the Council

¹⁸ 'Towards a Hermeneutic', pp. 1-13.

¹⁹ Pottmeyer observes the development which is discernible over the course of the four years 'in the council fathers' level of theological information, in their understanding of one another's positions, and in their awareness of the problems', 'A New Phase', pp. 39-40.

²⁰ 'The Abiding Significance of Vatican II' [Significance], *TI* Vol. xx, p. 96.

²¹ 'Interpretation', p. 87.

adopted spontaneously a mode of expression which had the character neither of dogmatic teaching valid for all time nor of canonical enactments'...²² Alberigo's perspective on this point is insightful: the Council, being pastoral, chose discourse rather than definition as a literary genre for conveying its decisions.²³

To say that Vatican II was conceived and understood itself as a pastoral Council does not deny its doctrinal import. It centred on the self-communication of God, in Christ, to human beings for their reconciliation with God and the unity of humankind. Its aim was to develop the church's self understanding, in the light of this truth, in terms of its contemporary social contexts. Thus, the Council was truly doctrinal by being biblical and pastoral. A defensible hermeneutic of the Council must take account of this stance of the Council itself.

This argument does not give *carte blanche* to 'progressive' readings, but it does lead an interpreting community to the 'return to the origins' which characterises much of the Council's documents. These positions then offer vantage points and perspectives on the Council's reiteration of doctrines formulated by the church along the path of history. They also provide the conditions of the possibility of radical renewal within the historical unfolding of the church's self-understanding and leads to a third dimension of a hermeneutic of the Council.

Commenting on Rahner's understanding of change, in particular change in church teaching, Richard Lennan summarises:

[As] understood [by Rahner], change implied a growth in understanding, a clarification of the connection with other doctrines, a new formulation for a new age, or the highlighting of features conducive to ecumenism. The impetus for this change came from the church's existence in history.²⁴

²² 'Interpretation', p. 89.

²³ See *Reception*, p. 24.

²⁴ *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner [Ecclesiology]*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 139.

Rahner speaks of his conviction that the Council brought to the future church 'new tasks and new challenges'.²⁵ Thus interpretation of the Council must be carried out with a willingness to find there the call to be church and fulfil mission in ways that are radically renewed: Rahner instances the challenge to the church be *truly* 'regional' in its self-expression, and not just in the use of vernacular language in the liturgy.²⁶ He recognises the need to renounce 'external means of power in matters of religion'.²⁷ He talks of the 'frontier crossed at the Council'²⁸ in relation to the move from neoscholastic theology to a theology which is more open to the 'questions with which modern theology is occupied'.²⁹ Theology must 'direct its thinking to the others to whom, for a variety of reasons, Christianity has become something alien'.³⁰ Moreover, Rahner sees the Council as representing 'a caesura in the history of the relations of the Catholic church both with other Christian churches and communities and with non-Christian world-religions'.³¹ For him a major indication of the crossing of frontiers was the Council's ratification of the insights of theologians (not least himself, in this case) into the reality of universal salvation.

It is clear that, in Rahner's view, a hermeneutic of Vatican II must not only see the Council within the tradition but also allow it to call the church of the present and the future to a self-understanding and a faith praxis which is open to the challenges of successive ages in history. This observation leads to the final question which was raised above: How is Vatican II to be interpreted so as to guide the church in its conversations with its social contexts as the latter change with time? Ruggieri may point the way here with his own question: 'I want to ask whether a method was

²⁵ 'Significance', p. 90.

²⁶ 'Significance', p. 92.

²⁷ 'Significance', p. 93.

²⁸ 'Significance', p. 95.

²⁹ 'Significance', p. 95.

³⁰ 'Significance', p. 96.

³¹ 'Significance', p. 97.

not inaugurated at the ... Council for facing the great questions which history puts to the church that was in some way new.'³² Two of the three components in Ruggieri's proposed method are consonant with Rahner's position, namely, the importance of history and openness to radical newness. However, in his third strand, reading the signs of the times, Ruggieri takes a largely spiritualised perspective:

In some way the one sign of the times is Christ himself. From him and from the presence of Christ in the church, through his spirit but also in all creation, it is possible to document how in the New Testament [the] ...opportune moment of grace runs through all history until the last coming and the final reconciliation of all things.³³

It is true that Christians believe they live, after the Resurrection and Pentecost, in the time of the Spirit, and that one element of their relationship with the world is to discern and affirm in their historical and cultural setting what is of the Spirit. But to understand that setting in the first place, and in particular to appraise it critically in the light of the message and mission of the church, it is necessary also to 'read the signs of the times' through the analyses of the secular sciences. Rahner says that the church has need of knowledge, which springs from human experience, and which is 'scientifically and systematically gained through modern history, sociology, scientific psychology and futurology'.³⁴ Lennan says of the *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie*, for which Rahner was both a joint editor and a major contributor, that it was

... far more than a manual for parochial clergy... [it] not only fulfilled Rahner's requirement that practical theology garner the insights of the many branches of theology and those of the secular sciences - the labour of historians, educationists, exegetes, sociologists, moralists, and dogmatic theologians is to be found in the various volumes - it also specifically directed itself towards the situation of the church in the modern world ...³⁵

³² 'Towards a Hermeneutic', p. 1.

³³ 'Towards a Hermeneutic', p. 8-9.

³⁴ 'New Image', p. 7.

³⁵ *Ecclesiology*, p. 228.

The process of dialogue between church and world is modelled in *Gaudium et spes*, where the Council attempts to read the signs of its own times and respond to them.³⁶

A hermeneutic of Vatican II must follow the Council's example and develop further the skills of on-going dialogue between the contemporary social reality and the Christian revelation, with the assistance of the Council's reflections for its own day.

In summary, then, it is proposed that in order to engage Vatican II in the ongoing task of Practical Theology the following elements, which are based principally on the theology of Karl Rahner, are vital: a realisation of the *historicity* of contexts of meaning; a recognition that the Council was primarily *pastoral* in nature and illuminated doctrine in that light; an acceptance that *radical change* is possible and even required within the continuity of the church's tradition and is called for by the Council; and a realisation that it is of vital importance to the church to *read the signs of the times*, not only from a spiritual-theological perspective but also through the findings of the human and social sciences in dialogue with theology, and thereby to develop the self-understanding of the church and discern its mission in relation to the world of its time and place.

It will now be possible to explore the Council's theology of local church which was examined in Chapter 5, using as axes the hermeneutical principles which have been developed. While it is clear that the local community envisaged by *LG* was a diocese united with its bishop, it is arguable, as Rahner claims, that the document laid the foundations for 'a *theology* of the parish and not merely for its juridical position'.³⁷

Before proceeding to this pivotal section of the entire dissertation, it is

³⁶ Rahner's own assessment of *Gaudium et spes* was that it needed much more expert work in order to achieve its aim. Cf. Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, p.184.

³⁷ 'Pastoral-Theological Observations on Episcopacy in the Teaching of Vatican II ['Episcopacy'], *TI* Vol. vi, p. 367.

important to address the inculturation debate, as already indicated in the introduction to this chapter. In this way, the relationship of the parish to its social and cultural setting may be viewed critically.

6.2 THE INCULTURATION DEBATE

6.2.1 Vatican II and Inculturation

When Rahner put forward his theological interpretation of Vatican II as ‘the church’s first official self-actualisation as a world church’³⁸ he offered as evidence, not the presence of indigenous bishops at the Council, but rather the influence on one another of members from the diverse cultural contexts of the world. The concept of ‘world church’, as Tracy observes must itself be tested for its Eurocentric interpretations of both ‘church’ and ‘world’. Nevertheless, Rahner claims that Vatican II was ‘the beginning of a beginning’ of the process of true inculturation for the church.

The recognition by Pope John XXIII in his Opening Speech of the difference between faith and its cultural forms has already featured in the account of the programme of Vatican II.³⁹ The discussion of culture in *Gaudium et spes* (53-63) and *Ad gentes* (19-22) recognised the diversity of cultural contexts of church (and hence, also the importance of local churches).

...the church, sent to all peoples of every time and place, is not bound exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, nor to any particular way of life or any customary pattern of living, ancient or recent. Faithful to her own tradition and at the same time conscious of her universal mission, she can enter into communion with various cultural modes, to her own enrichment and theirs too.⁴⁰

The dialectical relationship between evangelising the culture and inculturating the

³⁸ Rahner, ‘Theological Interpretation’.

³⁹ See pp. 167-168 above.

⁴⁰ *GS*, 58.

gospel is reflected in the Council statements, mostly without mediation. As with other polarities reflected in the Council documents this task remains for theological reflection and ecclesial practice.⁴¹ In a true dialogue between gospel and culture, both will be to some degree, reinterpreted.⁴²

While the core Christian revelation may transcend culture⁴³, yet it is never independent of culture in the sense that it is always expressed in the cultural form associated with some historical and geographical context.⁴⁴ The process of intercultural dialogue is as old as the encounter between the Jesus movement with its Jewish Palestinian roots and village-cultural characteristics with the urban environments and the philosophical traditions of the Graeco-Roman world. The centralisation which marked Roman Catholicism in the wake of the Reformation, and throughout the period of colonisation and evangelisation of the New World, led to a disregard for inculturation in the new churches within that tradition, at least.⁴⁵ Renewal movements from the early decades of the twentieth century, in this as well as other fields, were officially validated and encouraged by Vatican II. At the Council, cultural pluralism was experienced as a fact. The Council urged that the young churches should borrow from

⁴¹ See Pottmeyer, p. 203 above

⁴² See AG, 22. [Through] theological investigation .. in each major socio-cultural area ... under the light of the tradition of the universal Church, a fresh scrutiny will be brought to bear on the deeds and words which God has made known.

⁴³ As David Tracy observes: 'Short confessions of the faith [which] are theologically, and culturally ...often able to transcend their cultural embeddedness to bespeak the central realities of the faith to readers and hearers from cultures other than the culture of origin'. 'World Church or World Catechism: The Problem of Eurocentrism' ['World Church or World Catechism'], in *Concilium* 204, 4/1989 p. 28.

⁴⁴ The Western-European character of Christianity is not something which it can remove as an outer garment, to reveal an essential core of beliefs and moral norms.

⁴⁵ T. Howland Sanks documents isolated instances of missionaries of the sixteenth and early seventeenth, and again in the nineteenth centuries, whose instincts for inculturation were ahead of the general public consciousness as well as the theology or missiology of their day. *Salt, Leaven and Light, The Church called Community*, New York: Crossroad, 1992, pp. 197-198. In Enrique Dussel (ed.) *The Church in Latin America, 1492 -1992*, Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1992, there are many references to Bartolomé Las Casas who defended the rights of the Indians to their own culture against the conquistadors. See, for example, pp. 52-53.

... the culture and traditions of their people, their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and sciences, ...all those things which can contribute to the glory of their Creator, the revelations of the Saviour's grace, or the proper arrangement of Christian life.⁴⁶

The adaptation of liturgical elements to local cultures was encouraged by the Council in *Sacrosanctum concilium*. However, procedures for approval were put in place which have allowed Roman authorities to hold back on the implementation of this process. The retention of a basically juridical approach in the revised Code of Canon Law (1983) has been a disappointment to many who hoped for a basic constitution, which would leave specifics to local episcopal conferences.⁴⁷ Finally, in its Declaration on the Relationship of the church to Non-Christian Religions Vatican II moved away from apologetic argument to an openness to dialogue, and in the Decree on Religious Freedom the Council acknowledged the right of all people to their truth as they believe it.

In summary, it may be said that Vatican II did indeed mark a new beginning within the Roman Catholic tradition which can only be appreciated against the historical background of post-Reformation neo-scholastic theology and centralised structures. Its recognition of its polycentric cultural context and the implications of this for the church's self-understanding and mission, and its emphasis on the local church as truly constitutive of church, are closely inter-related. The Council documents affirm that the catholicity of the church implies deep inculturation in the diverse settings of the world. Vatican II presented the church as mystery, and as sacrament of the union of humanity with God and unity within humankind itself, supported by hierarchical structure that is bound by bonds of *communio*. The

⁴⁶ AG, 22. Since Vatican II, the most important papal statement on inculturation was *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, which was issued by Paul VI after the 1974 Synod on Evangelization. In it local churches are positively encouraged toward anthropological and cultural adaptation of the gospel message, while safeguarding the unity of the universal church.

⁴⁷ See Sanks, *Salt, Leaven, Light*, p. 200.

challenge posed by the inculturation that the Council promotes is the preservation of this unity across the real diversity to which inculturation gives rise.

6.2.2 Inculturation and Christian Distinctiveness

Vatican II emphasises the necessity for dialogue between the church as the 'sign and instrument' of union with God and unity of humanity in Christ, and the diverse cultural contexts within which the church exists. Because the mission of the church is universal (*GS* 58) and because elements of salvific grace may be manifested through the cultures of the world (*AG*, 22), the Council advocates that the church adopt a stance to each culture which is respectful and open to mutual enrichment and critique, while announcing 'the living God, and the one whom [God] has sent for the salvation of all, Jesus Christ' (*AG*, 13). At the same time, 'every appearance of syncretism and of false particularism' are to be avoided (*AG*, 22). Thus the tension between adaptation *to* culture, on the one hand, and assimilation *by* culture on the other is recognised. 40 years later, some theological movements judge this assimilation to have gone so far that Christian distinctiveness new needs to be emphasised.

By contrast with this position of the Council, Aidan Nichols adopts a unilaterally critical view of the present-day cultural context of church, and of its influence of church self-understanding and practice. In his introduction to *Christendom Awake*, following American social philosopher Christopher Lasch, he characterises Western culture which he sees as derived from modern progress as one where 'human beings suffer from a reduced sense of self, and search endlessly for an elusive fulfilment ...'.⁴⁸ For him, the Enlightenment project with its emphasis on

⁴⁸ Aidan Nichols, *Christendom Awake: on Re-energising the Church in Culture [Christendom Awake]*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999, p. 2.

reason as the liberator of the individual from authority ends in a decay of the self:

The celebration of reason alone, the liberation of the individual, the repudiation of traditional duties as repressive, have engendered a decay in the substance of the self.⁴⁹

While he allows that medical knowledge and services have been advanced, he suspects that undue regard for science and technology have replaced spiritual and social concerns in modern society. In his critique of the Enlightenment project Nichols lays the foundation for his post-liberal stance in relation to what the church's disposition vis-à-vis contemporary culture needs, in his view, to be.

In the face of the fragmentation of life in present-day Western society, Nichols (citing the theological anthropology of Aquinas, reflecting as it does the anthropology of striving of Aristotle) claims that human beings need not only the unifying influence of the transcendental, but names the (Catholic) church as the 'bearer of that revealed religion intended for all the nations'.⁵⁰ At most, diversified homogeneity is the only alternative to pluralism which Nichols sets out for modern society. The rediscovery by western society of its true destiny depends, in his view, on the revitalisation by the church of its faith. While assenting to the basic principle of the Decree on Religious Freedom, namely the right not to be coerced in one's religious beliefs (or lack of them), he takes the view that:

It is because, however, that Catholic church cannot be a sect, simply enjoying the integrity of its worship, doctrine and behaviour within the walls of a fortified city, but ever seeks to mediate in a universal way the Christ who would 'make all things new' that she ... has to strive to permeate and re-form culture, and the circumambient world of thought and institutions in which men and women live.⁵¹

In his review of the liturgical practice within Roman Catholicism he is more aware of the negative influences of social and psychological structures of modern

⁴⁹ *Christendom Awake*, p. 2.

⁵⁰ *Christendom Awake*, p. 6

⁵¹ *Christendom Awake*, p. 6.

society within the ritual, than of the positive values for inculturation contained in the Council's guidelines for adaptation and renewal (even if these are as yet implemented sketchily).⁵² Similarly, the impact of modern experimental science has, in Nichol's view, militated against 'the need to interpret the sacred dimension of the cosmos' which is, he argues, grasped only in sound doctrine. The transmission of 'sound doctrine' has, in his view, declined since Vatican II:

The weakening of doctrinal consciousness in the church since the Second Vatican Council is [due to] ..an unfortunate lack in the formal education of the faithful in the Christian verities ...[and] brings with it the subversion of all distinctively Christian living.⁵³

While it is true that the role of science in modern self-understanding needs to be analysed critically, a re-pristination of 'Christian verities' over against science shows a lack of willingness to dialogue and is firmly set in a counter-cultural, antagonistic model of church in relation to world.

Nichols' position within Roman Catholic theology has characteristics of the communitarianism of Stanley Hauerwas in the Protestant tradition, although Hauerwas eschews the notion of Christendom in his argument for the necessary separateness of the church in independence of the secular state and its culture. The common characteristics include: criticism of the liberal philosophy and society and a conception of the Christian community as counter-cultural in its social context, emphasis on a distinct Christian ethics, and on the church as the locus of the inherited tradition, without which the Christian way of life is neither discernible nor practicable.

David Fergusson observes the slide of Christology towards ecclesiology in Hauerwas' thinking, and cautions against its implications for the church's view of the

⁵² *Christendom Awake*, pp. 21-39.

⁵³ *Christendom Awake*, p. 46.

world beyond its own boundaries.⁵⁴ The revelation of God to humanity in Jesus is not only accessible in and through the church. To hold this would be to equate church and kingdom, a position which would run counter to the New Testament ecclesiologies explored in Chapter 4. A church which envisages itself as basically in isolation from the world would leave its members with scant guidelines for their practically unavoidable engagements with the world. They would, in fact, be limited to the concept of witness to belief and practice, from out of a church which protected itself from any effort at two-way translations much less mutual critique.

For Hauerwas the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus as accessed through the church form the basis of Christian ethical life. Moral practice and principle follow from moral character, which is formed within the community of the church distinct from secular society. Only the church is perceived to be able to teach the secular community realm, which has no inherent autonomy. It would appear that this is the case being largely advocated by Aidan Nichols. It is reminiscent of the position adopted by the Roman Catholic church in relation to Irish society before the complex array of change which began in the 1960s.

6.2.3 Mediation of the Inculturation Debate

Fergusson recognises in communitarian trends in theology a response to the realities of pluralism and secularism within the Western social context of the Christian churches of the late twentieth century. He points out that there are strong similarities between the churches' position in the present-day Western society and the pre-Constantinian situation. In the early Christian communities, as they struggled to define themselves not only in their social context within the Empire, but also in the

⁵⁴ David Fergusson, *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 72.

religious context of their Jewish origins, the boundary-making functions of Baptism and the Eucharist became clear.⁵⁵ Yet, the members of the church communities were members of the wider society, and experienced unavoidable ambivalence: as believers they sought to mediate between their engagement with their world and withdrawal from it. The code of life of Christians is indeed based on the story, praxis and destiny of Jesus, and yet, from the earliest days Christian ethics have instanced the secular philosophies of the natural law.⁵⁶

The appeal to a universal moral order had a dual function. It enabled the apologists to recognise the moral perception of pagan society at its best, thus demonstrating that the Christian religion did not directly contradict what was already known in part. But it also had the purpose of showing the distinctiveness of Christian practice over against the customs of the host society.⁵⁷

The followers of Christ in every age continue to live in the world. But they live in solidarity with all believers through the church. In the early communities, minorities in their social contexts, the social stratification which was normal to the wider society was, when it showed up within the community, acutely at odds with the Christian message. As Fergusson observes: 'Divisions of race, class, wealth, and gender were more acutely felt within the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit. This gave Christian ethics a stronger social dimension than one finds in the traditions of Plato and Aristotle'.⁵⁸

In a similar way, J.B. Metz defines Christian distinctiveness by the guiding principles of liberation and respect for otherness. He identifies 'unity and diversity' as a central issue of the inculturation debate. He sets out the dangers (on both sides) which must be avoided through mediation between extreme positions:

the danger of intensified centralism as a defensive protection for

⁵⁵ See p.107 above, for Wayne Meeks' observations.

⁵⁶ Fergusson, *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*, p.17.

⁵⁷ Fergusson, *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*, p.18.

⁵⁸ Fergusson, *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*, p.14.

unity, the speculative danger of a gnosis remote from history offered as a transcendental basis for the culturally polycentric diversity of Christianity, and the associated danger that the fixed and unchangeable 'deposit' of doctrinal and moral teaching will be envisaged as like Plato's ideas, and the parallel 'liberal' danger of envisaging cultural polycentrism as a neutral and innocent coexistence of cultural contexts.⁵⁹

Metz suggests that the church can negotiate a path between these distortions, not by ignoring its Western European history, but rather by finding in its biblical inheritance within that history two guiding principles, namely a mission to seek liberation and justice for all and an ethos of respect for otherness.⁶⁰ The latter Metz describes as a hermeneutical culture, and stresses its importance

... because the European mentality as formed over the last 2,000 years, while it has internalised the biblical universalism whose limit is the 'ends of the earth' (see Acts 1:8), has been guided in this far more by the principle of domination than by that of acknowledgement.⁶¹

Recognising the eschatological difference between the church and the kingdom of God, Metz suggests, is the key to distinguishing between the universal mission of the church and the universality of the kingdom. He suggests that the church is sent, from out of its own cultural origins which it can never undo or deny, to engage respectfully with the peoples of the world and to witness, in each historical and cultural context, to the liberating power of God revealed in Jesus. Within the framework of the biblical principles of freedom/justice and recognition of the other, he suggests as a bridging category for intercultural exchange that of memory, especially in the form of remembering suffering. Given that 'the church ... is a remembering and retelling community gathered around the Eucharist to devote itself to following Jesus', this approach to mission is entirely consonant with its own

⁵⁹ 'Unity and Diversity', p.82.

⁶⁰ The biblical imperatives of action for justice and of acknowledgement of difference are distinct, even though the patterns of the global economies of the modern world have led, in many instances, to a correspondence between material oppression and cultural exclusion.

⁶¹ 'Unity and Diversity', p.82.

culture, and at the same time respectful of the culture to which it is sent. The method of exchanges of remembering, within the framework of biblical principles, as put forward by Metz, is rooted in experience and accessible as communication even between cultures.

Metz presents the approach of remembering as 'more valuable for productive interchange between different cultures than the anonymous argumentation of classical metaphysics or the scientific language of Western rationality'.⁶² While proposing to avoid an 'ahistorical' idealistic transcendentalism, Metz' characterising of metaphysics, science and even reason as of little value to theology and Christian practice downplays too much the intellectual value of theology as 'sure knowledge'. Robert Schreier claims that the precision and clarity of theology as sure knowledge, acquired through its roots in the Greek apologists, guarantee a rigorous internal account of the experience of faith, and thus makes of theology a worthy participant in dialogue with other forms of knowledge and their attendant cultures.⁶³ He acknowledges the traditional tendency in the West to identify all theology as of this one type, to the neglect (for example) of theology as wisdom or theology as *praxis*. Nevertheless, his appreciation of the importance of rational analysis for cross-cultural communication contrasts with Metz' view: Because of its emphasis on precision and clarity, theology as sure knowledge has special capacities for cross-cultural communication. It can develop categories that can be translated across cultural boundaries with a minimum of information loss.

This view is compatible with what is advocated by David Tracy:

short confessions of the faith [which] are theologically, and culturally, through their relative modesty of aim, often able to transcend their cultural embeddedness to bespeak the central realities of the faith to

⁶² 'Unity and Diversity', p.85.

⁶³ See Robert Schreier, *Constructing Local Theologies*, New York: Orbis Books, 1985, p.90.

readers and hearers from cultures other than the culture of origin.⁶⁴

This point is strengthened by Tracy when he observes that the situations of the early, i.e. New Testament communities are ‘sufficiently distinct to demand often very different renderings of the common narrative, the common following of Christ, the common confession of Christ’.⁶⁵ Tracy’s advocacy of the search for mutual critical correlations between the resources of the Christian tradition and the human enterprise expressed in contemporary culture represents a challenge to the church, which will always face the argument for withdrawal as a critique of society and engagement as expression of Christian mission.⁶⁶

6.3 THE PARISH COMMUNITY WITHIN THE LOCAL CHURCH

6.3.1 The Parish as Actualisation of Church

Given their historical nature, human beings must belong within the church primarily in face-to-face relationships. Christianity as a historical religion has a narrative character which is consonant with this basic quality of the human condition. This reality has been demonstrated in the story of the early Christian communities as exemplified at Antioch and Corinth. The church as mystery and sacrament finds expression in community, in ritual and in sharing of life, and in agreed, sometimes distinctive mores. It is in the very local, ‘parochial’ setting that, for believers, their life world can encounter the Christian mystery directly. This assertion does not limit their engagement with the wider network of the church, but it does give it a groundedness within the context of their lives. The community of the parish is potentially, also, the channel for the Christian to engage *as a Christian witness* in the

⁶⁴ ‘World Church or World Catechism: The Problem of Eurocentrism’ [‘World Church or World Catechism’], in *Concilium* 204, (4/1989) p.28.

⁶⁵ ‘World Church or World Catechism’, p.29.

⁶⁶ The discernment required takes context as a significant factor. This task recalls the Corinthians – Thessalonians contrasts discussed in section 4.4.2, pp.122 ff..

wider society.

The evolution of *Lumen gentium* represents a definite shift of emphasis from church as *societas perfecta* with its implications of a pre-determined and unchanging mode of being, to church as a 'pilgrim' people – people moving in time from one set of (historical) conditions to another. Such movement implies engagement – mutual and varying interrelationships and also interaction with the continually-changing environment. It is in the concrete circumstances of life that people, i.e. men and women of their day, participate in this 'pilgrimage', and hence church as pilgrim people is most really and most visibly present in the local (parochial) community. Thus, it is arguable that Vatican II does envisage the parish as a living ecclesial entity comprising a pilgrim people before and beyond its being a juridical unit which is dependent on a higher authority (of diocese).⁶⁷

Rahner is emphatic that the Council does indeed 'underline the essence of the concrete community (the altar-community, the local community, the parish) as a true "church", in which *the* church is realised and made present to the world'.⁶⁸ He recognises that Vatican II has left to be done the task of developing further the theology of the local altar community as the 'manifestation and actualisation of the church [and making it] vital and fruitful in the life of the individual community'.⁶⁹

He observes that

... as long as the local community does not recognise itself with an existential faith in thought and deed to be the church..., as long as the individual community feels itself to be no more than the smallest administrative unit by means of which the *universal church* (alone) effects the salvation of the individual, it has not yet truly understood itself.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Regarding the ecclesiological positions of Trent and Vatican I what must be observed is that Vatican II itself neither superseded nor fully reiterated them. Rather, in keeping with its stance of taking history seriously, it relativised them.

⁶⁸ 'Episcopacy', p. 367.

⁶⁹ 'Episcopacy', p. 367.

⁷⁰ 'Episcopacy', p. 367.

In 'Theology of the Parish' published in 1956, Rahner had put forward his thesis that 'the theological relation between the church and the parish consists in this: that the parish is, in a very definite sense, the representative actuality of the church; the church appears and manifests itself in the event of the central life of the parish'.⁷¹ He acknowledged the existence of the church 'as a complete and single entity founded by Christ and intended for all [people]... [which is] of the greatest importance for salvation'.⁷² He did not, by that fact, undermine the local expression of the church, i.e. the parish, but rather argues that local instantiation is required by the church's historical nature:

... one cannot dispute that there, where the church *acts* – that is, teaches, prays, offers the Sacrifice of Christ, etc. – it attains a higher degree of actuality than it does by its mere continuing existence. The church is a visible society; and as such, it is ever compelled again and again to realize its historical place-time apprehensibility through the visible actions of [people]. It must always and again and again become event.⁷³

Rahner was not suggesting here that the church so realised is a separately-established church. Rather did he argue that the one church 'must translate itself from a certain potentiality into a definite, determined actuality, and the whole enduring essence of the church is directed to this event.'⁷⁴ Rahner elaborates this point:

...the most effective and radical sacramental self-realization of the church as the redeeming unity of human beings together in God occurs in the eucharist. Here the church is present in its completeness and here it is unquestionably in place, in local community, which is not absolutely necessarily but preferably and normally the parish community.⁷⁵

Vatican II reflected this theology of Rahner most closely in its conception of

⁷¹ 'The Parish', p. 25.

⁷² 'The Parish', p. 26.

⁷³ 'The Parish', p. 26.

⁷⁴ 'The Parish', p. 26

⁷⁵ 'Theology and Spirituality of Pastoral Work in the Parish', in *Theologian Investigations*, 19, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983, p.89.

the diocese. Nevertheless, in its presentation of the Eucharist as the defining event of church (LG 26) it can be said to imply, in practice, that the parish community is the actualisation of church in time and place. On this, as on other questions, the Council may be said to treat the subject in 'deliberately open terms'.⁷⁶

Secondly, while the Council presents the diocese, centred on the bishop, as the local church,⁷⁷ in practice it is the parish which has capacity to offer the experience of community which is integral to church as People of God – a foundational theme in the Council's ecclesiology. On the one hand there is the possibility in parish of interpersonal connections, because of the manageable size of the unit and the immediacy of the relationships which exist there, and on the other hand there is, normally, in the parish a healthy and challenging heterogeneity that arises from the localised geographic basis of the assembly. In this context the life and mission of the church truly take flesh in the concrete circumstances and experiences of Christians in community. It is here that the pastoral emphasis of the Council applies most directly, and it is this community which gathers for the Eucharist in a way which truly celebrates and nourishes its daily life.

Rahner attempts to harmonise the Council's emphasis on the diocese with his own vision of the parish. He recognises that, in practice, 'the real and essential work of the church ... the real care of souls, the *Kerygma*, the word of grace in the sacraments, the witness to Christ before the 'World' is in reality ...carried out ... in the parish.'⁷⁸ He offers as a possible bridging concept the Council's interpretation of the priest in the parish as fulfilling there the tasks of the bishop.⁷⁹ It will be

⁷⁶ cf. Komonchak, 'The Church Universal as the Communion of Local Churches', *Concilium*, 146, p. 33.

⁷⁷ e.g. LG 26.

⁷⁸ 'Episcopacy', p. 366.

⁷⁹ 'Episcopacy', p. 366.

suggested below that only a relationship of fellowship, characterising the parish as a local community and recognising a mutual inter-relationship based on faith and the Spirit, will encompass the juridical aspects of the parish's relationship with diocese without reducing the parish to a mere administrative unit.

The radical newness in the self-understanding of the church initiated (according to Rahner) at Vatican II i.e. the Christian church as a world church, rested on the existential reality of the presence and contributions of the indigenous bishops of the churches of the Latin American, African and Asian continents. True, these 'young' churches had organic links with the church of Rome. But their cultures and their immediate experiences (e.g. of systemic oppression of the poor) were powerful catalysts in heightening the awareness of the Council to the need for the church to take form in each place in accordance with the life-experience of the people of that place. The challenge to the church is to face the reality of its time and place. Living experience, e.g. through the work of liberation, in the context of a shared belief in and commitment to the gospel message and mission is a point of entry into communion with God and others through Christ. Once again, it is arguable that the parish, as the locus of the church's immediate encounter with culture is not just *part* of a church, but that the parish is constitutive of church and *is* (in union with its bishop and its diocesan matrix) a realisation of the church.

Finally, by its effort to *read the signs of the times*, Vatican II can be said to have attempted the kind of engagement which reaches peoples' lifeworld, and which can happen most immediately, though of course not exclusively in the parish. In the parish, the church is challenged to engage in a real and significant way with its social context, even if the task of reading the signs of the times equally applies to analysing employment policies, scientific developments and their impact on human self-

understanding, patterns of migration, and similar significant factors and forces in the lives of the community. However, the task of engagement must not be limited to the local context. In fact, it is possible that attention to immediate community issues could mask the more global dimensions of social policy that help to determine much of the character of local situations. Community movements could even support inertia at national and international levels, if not subject to critical review. Likewise, the engagement of parish community groups with social need and problems does not supply for strategic action on its part, and on the part of dioceses and national church agencies, in the critique of more global social policies, and advocacy for their continual transformation, for example towards greater inclusion, equality and recognition of human dignity.

What has been argued in this section is that, while 'local' church in the documents of Vatican II is expressly regional or diocesan, and while the influence of Rahner's theology of local church was most evident in the Council's teaching on the diocese, the Council was certainly not at odds with his theology of parish as a living, localised ecclesial entity, a sign and instrument (in communion with its bishop and diocesan community) of the union of people with one another and with God. There is nothing in Vatican II which would not support Rahner's view that:

the church will make its impact as a present reality there where the presence of Christ is made real and experienced in the authorised preaching of his gospel and in the commemoration of his death in the Eucharist.⁸⁰

What must now be worked out are the implications of this theology.

6.3.2 The Parish as the Concrete Realisation of the Church

If the parish community may legitimately understand itself theologically as the

⁸⁰ Rahner, 'New Image', p. 11.

church in its localised realisation, its 'representative actuality', as has been argued, it follows that the parish in itself (as well as in its relationship to the universal church), *no less than* its diocese *or* the universal church, must be characterised by unity and apostolicity, by catholicity and holiness. Rahner recognises the challenge:

If the local community is the church, its concrete form while being changeable and determined by historical circumstance is the concrete form of the *essence* of the church ... so that the Christian can truly experience *here* what is really meant by 'the church': the sacramental presence of the divinising and forgiving grace of God in the unity of [people] in love.⁸¹

It is Rahner's belief that it is the 'empirically real structure' of the church in the local community, i.e. the parish, which determines the accessibility of its episcopal nature to the religious experience of the Christian.⁸² Just as the Bishop in his diocese is not fulfilling his mission if he awaits and implements only what higher authority in the church decrees, without taking initiative, giving careful attention to the reality of his own context and the life of the people, so in the parish there is a responsibility to discern what is the Christian response, within the norms and teaching of the church, to the specific circumstances and happenings of its place and time.

The parish, no less than the diocese, is true to its theological nature only when it sees its life and mission, not only nor primarily in terms of human law and organisation but as a manifestation of what the church is. In this theological requirement lies the basis for its *communio*, both internally and beyond its own boundaries in the wider church context, thereby precluding fragmentation or isolation of the local congregation.

Of course such a community, which feels itself to be the concrete realisation of the church as achieved through word and sacrament, will be conscious of being united to all other communities which likewise are this same church, will according to the will of Christ give concrete expression to this union, this state of being united in the

⁸¹ Rahner, 'Episcopacy', p. 367-368.

⁸² 'Episcopacy', p. 368.

Spirit with these other communities, even at the level of communal and social life as such, and moreover, will be conscious of having a duty to do this.⁸³

In *communio*, especially, lies a basis for the relationship of the parish with bishop and diocese, because the dependence of the parish on its bishop for the ordination of a priest who will preside at its Eucharist does not make of the parish a mere part of the diocese. The exercise by the bishop of his ministry as bishop by virtue of his ordination is a service to the community of believers in his diocese not only as a diocesan church but also in the actualisation of church as the community of believers in the parishes of the diocese. On this point Rahner says:

... in the church the law is no worldly law but a law which is holy and sustained by the Spirit, the embodiment of grace, and that it is put into effect and applied in accordance with the will of Christ only when its application is inspired and sustained by [the] Spirit ...⁸⁴

The life of God's People within the church was characterised in Vatican II as a life of 'faith, liturgy and love'.⁸⁵ As I have demonstrated in Chapter 4, the four dimensions of witness, worship, community and ministry – *martyria*, *leitourgia*, *koinonia*, *diakonia* – of Christian community life are normative for the church. It follows that in view of the theological understanding of the parish which has been put forward, they must also be its defining characteristics. In the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults the process of introducing new members is set out as induction into 'the teaching, the fellowship, the prayer and the service' of the parish community.⁸⁶

⁸³ 'New Image', p. 11.

⁸⁴ 'Episcopacy', p. 363.

⁸⁵ AG 14.

⁸⁶ *Catholic Rites Today, Abridged Texts for Students*, Alan Bouley (ed.) Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1985, pp. 68-69.

6.3 CONCLUSION

The aim of this chapter was to develop a theology of the life and mission of the parish community which is implicit in the ecclesiology of Vatican II. By reading the theology of local church which the Council developed, in the light of the history of the Council, its pastoral nature, its theological significance, and its concern to facilitate a real dialogue with the world of its day, such a theology of the parish has been put forward. The post-liberal concern which would question the thrust of Vatican II towards inculturation was addressed. The on-going dialectic between church and world, centering on interpretation of mission, of the 'proprium' of Christian ethics and the role of the church in the service of the kingdom was discussed. The valid reservations of post-liberal views, e.g. against exaggerated individualism and 'scientific-breakthrough' mentality, and in favour of Christian distinctiveness, are to be respected. In a mutual dialogue they can help to illuminate and refine understanding of the contribution of the Council to the ongoing theological and practical task of taking the Christian message to the 'ends of the earth'. In particular the communities of the parishes, where the members of the believing and worshipping community are most at home, were validated as real locations and instantiation of the church and points of inculturation of the gospel. Finally the implications of this theology for *praxis* of the community of the parish were pointed out. And so, it is now possible, in Part III of the dissertation, to map an array of strategies by which the parish community may be enabled to fulfil its Christian task.

Chapter 7

THE COMMUNITY OF THE PARISH AS A CHRISTIAN FAITH COMMUNITY

In this and the following two chapters I shall discuss the development in practice of the Christian community of the parish¹, in the light of the sociological and theological studies of the first two parts of the dissertation. I shall explore first the practice of the parish in the light of its foundational characteristic as a community of Christian believers. My aim is to address the following questions : (1) How is the parish to understand, witness to and transmit its faith? (2) How may it experience the implication of its beliefs together in fellowship? (3) How must it symbolise, celebrate and nourish its faith especially in the Eucharist? (4) How can the members serve and support one another and the wider community through their message of hope?

7.1 CONTEXT

The parish community will reflect by and large the historical and social background and the contemporary characteristics of Catholicism in Ireland. While the economic and social profile of the parish will depend on location, it is likely that it will be to some degree a mixed community with a measure of the polarisation which marks Irish society as a whole.² The average levels of educational attainment will, in all probability, be rising. It is to be expected that an awareness of issues of equality, and in particular of women's right to participate equally at all societal levels will be growing. It is equally likely that the rising individualism which characterises modern society will be evident. In this regard, Bellah's characterisation of the 'enclave' as

¹ As I already indicated in the Introduction (p.5 above), the parish is taken as typical of average, socially mixed community.

² See p. 10 above.

an extension of that individualism is applicable. There is growing evidence that local communities in the Irish context have difficulty accommodating difference.

The cultural pluralism which has been evolving in Ireland, particularly since the 1960s will be operative within the community. Most likely it will be particularly evident among the young. In relation to Church, it is reasonable to assume that a spectrum of views will be represented among the members of the parish community. Older parishioners (50+) will have grown up in the pre-Vatican II Church with its emphasis on individual salvation, devotion and Church authority. Opportunities for and interest in serious development of understanding in the light of the Council's teaching have been limited, even though Church practice, e.g. in the liturgy, has been adapted in some measure, at least, since Vatican II. The attitudes, beliefs and practice of younger parishioners will probably reflect a plurality of outlooks which qualify for description by D. Hervieu-Léger as a 'bricolage'. In all age-groups there will be those for whom Church involvement is confined to observing the 'Rites of Passage'. Likewise throughout the age-ranges of the community it is possible there will be found advocates of the various traditional and new movements in spirituality, from 'confraternities' to biblical fundamentalism, from pentecostalist to New-Ageist approaches.

7.2 PRINCIPLES

Given the likely diversity and complexity of the parish community, in socio-economic, cultural, and religious terms, pastoral practice has need of guiding principles if it is to be constructive. In Part II there emerged a theology of the parish community as the actualisation of Church, which challenges it to respond as Church in its local context to the realities presented therein. This mission is, however, to be accomplished in communion with the diocese and the universal Church. It is

reasonable, therefore, to expect that diocese, especially as 'local Church' (in the sense used in Vatican II) will be a source of support and solidarity in drawing-up and implementing pastoral policies and guidelines. The theology of parish as representative actuality of church also suggests that the parish is called to a responsible appropriation of diocesan thinking, and to a critical analysis of its position within its own milieu. In the Irish context pastoral planning at national or diocesan level is not generally in place, and thus parish development may precede and feed into diocesan processes. The resources of practical theology are called for at the level of *praxis* in the parish.

Ziebertz describes the challenge to Church and to practical theology in terms of the structural creativity it needs to find 'communication possibilities where the practical questions of living and the search for meaning will encounter substantial religion'.³ This task is also properly a task for the parish, understanding itself as church. The (unacceptable) alternative for Ziebertz is the solidifying of positions based on an assumed discontinuity between religion and modernity, and consequent judgement of those who differ. What may be required in terms of the sociology of religion, is a willingness to move out from substantivist positions and find areas of common interest with those whose understanding of religion are more functionalist in nature. It has already been noted that the latter view may be gaining acceptance among sections of Irish society.⁴

Applications of Ziebertz's principle for pastoral practice in the parish will be suggested later in the chapter. First, the challenges of the sociological situation, of the religious response of Irish people today, and of the theology of parish, for the life and mission of the parish as a community of faith will be enumerated.

³ See p. 59 above.

⁴ See p. 68 above.

7.3 CHALLENGES

The surveys of religion scanned in Chapter 3, in particular the EVSSG study of 1990, indicated that the prevailing economic, social and cultural environment is a strongly influential factor in determining levels of belief and practice.⁵ Pastoral ministry within parish must take into account these findings. While the educational attainment of parishioners is expected, overall, to be rising, it is also true that some are excluded by their circumstances, or by choice, from this development. These too are to be included in the constituency of the parish, and are a particular challenge to its pastoral activity. At a time of momentous change, such as has taken place during the forty years since 1960, the near-absence of on-going education in religion for adults⁶ is clearly unacceptable and contributes to much of the difficulty which arises in the planning and execution of pastoral practice in the parish. The need to redress this situation constitutes a serious challenge. The question of women's equal participation is an especially acute one in the context of parish ministry, given the structural exclusion of women which exists within the Roman Catholic Church universally.

The challenge to the parish community in the concreteness of its situation is to appropriate and interpret the sources of self-understanding of church in Catholic theology, namely Scripture and tradition, within their own cultural and social context, while safeguarding their *communio* with the diocese and the church universal. The hermeneutical principles discussed in chapter 4 are relevant to this task. Four important features of the local Christian community arose in Antioch and in Corinth and these are equally relevant to the Irish parish as a community of faith:

- (1) The traditions, history and current concerns of the local community are the

⁵ See p. 76 above.

⁶ See p. 46 above.

medium in which faith is to find expression (the challenge of *inculturation* without loss of distinctiveness); (2) it is highly probable that the sociographic characteristics of the civil community will be mirrored in the parish, especially in the Irish context, where these are almost coterminous. This situation calls for a sociological awareness which is not cancelled out by the theological concept of fellowship. Rather is the ideal of Christian community of equals greatly challenged by the reality of socio-economic and other inequalities; (3) in the concrete situation of parish community difficulties and differences inevitably arise on many fronts. Christians are challenged to find in their shared beliefs a ground for the resolution of conflict. As illustrated at Antioch and Corinth, this struggle can result in deeper understanding of the Christian message; (4) a community of faith has need of leadership forms which will facilitate discernment of how parish is to be Church in its immediate social setting, and call for an authentic communal expression of Christian faith.

The theology of parish which has been proposed challenges the parish community to understand itself as a congregation of believers. In the first place, the parish must outgrow any sense of itself as 'no more than the smallest administrative unit [of] the universal church'.⁷ It must rather, understand itself *as* Church, truly actualised and present. At the same time, as church, it must also continue in a relationship of communion with the church universal. Secondly, in the New Testament, the Fathers, and the ecclesiology of Vatican II, for all realisations of Church the celebration of the Eucharist is central. So too for the community of the parish. Gathering to share in the Lord's Supper is theologically the high point of parish life. The challenge to the parish is to make of it, existentially also, the event in which the community of believers expresses itself most fully.

⁷ See p. 225 above.

The Council's theology of the Church as sacrament of union with God and the unity of humanity calls on the parish community members, as church, to be signs and instruments of reconciliation with God and of unity among people in their familial and communal settings. This call involves all members of the parish in their priestly role, participating on behalf of their fellow human beings in what Rahner called the 'cult' or whole liturgical life of the Church. It also challenges them, by their regard for each person and the high standards by which they live their lives, to be worthy witnesses to the reality of God's self-communication, in Christ, to all.

In the fourth place, the theology of the episcopacy in Vatican II established that the Bishop's mission to teach, sanctify and rule (in communion with the College of Bishops and the universal Church) is shared with the priest who exercises this role in the immediacy of the parish. In the context of the Council's teaching, then, there is a challenge here to the parish as the community of Christians to understand the gift of ordination as a ministry of service to the mission of the whole people of God in the parish. This understanding must not be clouded by the historical reality that women are excluded from ordination, or by the close association of the ordained priesthood with the power structures of the Church.

Vatican II was summoned by Pope John XXIII in the cause of *aggiornamento*. The parish after the Council must also find the contemporary and locally relevant images and idioms in which to formulate its message and its rituals. This imperative reiterates the challenge of inculturation already identified above as coming from Scripture, without unhelpful assimilation. Congar's vision of a 'new programme of ministries' which he claims is implicit in the Council's pneumatology

challenges the parish to welcome the diverse gifts of its members in the service of the mission of the parish.⁸

Finally, the Council's teaching on the universality of God's saving grace both encourages and challenges the parish as a congregation with a mission. As Rahner observes, the obligation to 'preach' (i.e. spread the message of Christ) endures. The task of evangelisation of the young as well as of the non-believer is set in a context of hope.⁹

The current ambivalence (not so much in words as in deeds) on the part of some higher Church authorities in relation to Vatican II, which has been discussed above, is also likely to be found in the parish. The temptations of restoration and détente which were noted must be recognised and resisted if the congregation of believers which is the parish is to rise to the challenges put to it by Scripture and the Council. How the parish may make an authentic response to its calling will be explored. First a brief account of the *dramatis personae* is required.

7.4 WHO CONSTITUTES THE PARISH COMMUNITY?

To make this discussion as practical as possible, it is necessary to specify who in the parish is being referred to in each instance under discussion. Theologically, the community of the baptised (which includes the ordained) are charged with the Christian mission in their time and place. In Canon Law it is the Parish Priest who is responsible to the Bishop for the pastoral ministry of the parish.¹⁰ Ideally, the administrative functions of the Parish Priest are to be exercised and seen as facilitating the mission of the whole community. His commission in ordination by

⁸ See p.162 above.

⁹ See. p.169 above.

¹⁰ *CIC*, Canon 515,1.

the Bishop to share, in the parish, the episcopal roles of teaching, sanctifying and ruling is meaningless if not considered in relation to the life and mission of the total parish as church. Depending on circumstances the Parish Priest may be assisted by other ordained priests or deacons in these roles. If he wishes to model the communal nature of the mission which all share, he may commit himself to a team ministry with these priest(s)/deacon(s) and others, religious or lay. Formal leadership roles in the parish can be exercised well by team members and accepted within the parish, if parishioners are assured that there are processes of discussion and accountability within the team structure. However, non-ordained members of parish leadership teams will often find that they have to work hard at gaining acceptance within traditional parish settings. The variety of gifts which a leadership team may possess is a strength in a community which is itself varied. The inclusion of women in a form of team ministry is one way in which praxis may run ahead of principle and even, however long-term this goal may be, keep the vexed questions of participation in decision-making and of the ordination of women on the agenda of the faithful.

The Parish Priest is encouraged to establish co-workers from among the laity through the 'new programme of ministries' envisaged by Congar and endorsed by Vatican II. These ministries may be undertaken in full-time, part-time or voluntary capacities.¹¹ While such ministries on the part of lay people are an expression of their baptismal commission, their primary purpose (as in the case of ordained ministries) is to facilitate the mission of the total community to witness to, share, celebrate and live the Christian message. Theologically and ideally there are in the parish no completely passive recipients of the ministration of Church. In reality parishioners choose the extent to which they identify with and articulate the Christian

¹¹ Canons 231,1 and 231,2

commitment implicit in their baptism which, in the case of the vast majority, was an event that took place (on another's initiative) in their infancy.

The concept of the 'parish community' may be difficult to define, and yet experience shows that a sense of corporateness can and does arise through the significant events which mark the history and life of the parish. The fostering of a communal sense, especially in the 'individualised' social context of today,¹² is a function of leadership, both formal and informal, in the parish.

7.5 PRACTICE

It is now possible to set out some ways and means whereby the parish today may realise itself as church under the heading of faith community. The four-dimensional scheme of *martyria, koinonia, leitourgia and diakonia* will be applied, while keeping as a background to the discussion the challenges which have been enumerated above. What follows, I hope, would serve as a basis for either planning or evaluation in the parish in any of the groupings which arise from what has been said in the previous section.

7.5.1 Christian Teaching and Witness

The good news of Jesus Christ has been transmitted through generations and around the world for close on 2000 years. As a basis for the historical religion which is Christianity the message is spoken, written, taught, preached, discussed, adapted, and applied continuously. New insights into the foundational texts arise through scholarship which continues to develop. New contexts interrogate and challenge the message. The conviction of believers is tested in every age and place, ever since the

¹² See p.49 above.

opposition of the powers of his day to Christ himself. Christians should always be in a position to give an account of the hope which is theirs.

It is vital that, in initiating the young of the Christian community in baptism, a commitment is taken on to actually pass on the Christian message. At present in the Irish context, this task which is undertaken by family, sponsors and the community in the course of the baptismal ritual, is greatly supported within the school system. The merits and demerits of the arrangement are outside the scope of this work. The fact that all or almost all catechesis takes place within the non-voluntary time of young people leaves little scope for the exercise of free choice in relation to their faith-formation. Parishes should consider seriously the implications of this situation, and be prepared to find a causal relationship between it and the fact that many young people distance themselves from the Church after their formal schooling. The relationship of schools to Church has a long history in Ireland, some aspects of which were referred to in Chapter 1.¹³

The pastoral obligations of the parish include the provision for evangelisation of the young baptised members of the community. This responsibility requires interest and partnership in the work of catechists in schools and supplementary provision where necessary, especially for those young people who may be outside of those schools which include catechesis in their programmes. The task requires a systematic and skilled involvement which should always present itself as supporting the primary educators, i.e. the parents. It is a responsibility for which the Parish Priest can, and in most situations should establish co-workers, organised into a structured ministry.

The scope of a ministry of religious education in the parish is not limited to

¹³ See p. 12 above.

catechesis of the young and the neophyte. Indeed, a comprehensive programme is required, which caters for the life-span of all the members of the community, in order to facilitate a developing understanding and appreciation of the faith in relation to their unfolding experience of life, and also in the context of the changing circumstances in community and society in which they are called to be witnesses to Christ. Programmes of Scripture study, of readings of the documents of Vatican II, of theology, especially theology of Church and parish, as well as of history and much more would provide the support and enrichment that adult faith requires. High points in the educational work of the parish include programmes for parents of children and young people prior to the events of Baptism, First Holy Communion and Confirmation; pre-marriage programmes which focus on the theology and spirituality of marriage; youth programmes which centre on choice and commitment; and many others.

The work of catechesis is particularly challenging in the contemporary situation in Ireland. The pace and direction of social change has been indicated. The near absence, until quite recently, of enquiry, of theology and of 'loyal dissent' within the Catholic community as a whole has led to a dependence on a 'catechism' approach, which suggests literal and definitive answers to questions of faith, life and meaning and which are a poor preparation for dialogue with youth at the present time. All talk of God, salvation in Jesus, and other aspects of faith is of necessity an approximation to mystery. In place of doctrinaire definitions, young people are much more likely to be able to respond to a stance which is open and admits of not-knowing. For them God is often 'one of the mysteries of the world'.¹⁴ It is clear from the survey findings presented in Chapter 3 that the Church is not

¹⁴ Spontaneous answer of a ten-year-old.

communicating the Christian message as good news to young people in Ireland today. This is one of the most crucial aspects of the mission of parish at the present time.

The religious adult education provision in parish should include explorations of the faith on an on-going basis. In theory, the homily during the parish Eucharist is intended to meet this need. In practice the methodology whereby one person speaks and many, perhaps hundreds, listen in silence is most inappropriate to how adults learn. Add to this the heterogeneity of the assembly and restrictions on the choice of preacher, and it becomes clear that supplementary arrangements are required. Positive action in the area of adult religious education, on the part of a parish or indeed a group of neighbouring parishes (perhaps a deanery) could include the sponsoring of trainee staff or volunteers at recognised training programmes, or the engaging of competent tutors to service programmes of teaching in the area. Three elements must be safeguarded: the content needs to be in line with contemporary theological developments and at the same time nourish the parish's *communio* with the Church, and the methodology must apply the principles of good adult education.

There is an additional responsibility related to the area of teaching, which rests on parish leadership. At the present time there are many schools of thought and practice within the field of Christian life and evangelisation. The parish has not only the right but the duty to ensure that visiting teachers, perhaps invited on the initiative of an individual or group within the parish, represent theological positions which are defensible and are presented in a manner which allows a dialogue to take place. Similarly, parishioners who promote learning material within the community, e.g. video programmes of Bible study, should be encouraged to incorporate their activities into the main-stream of parish life. The attraction of fundamentalist

approaches is often the seeming certainty which they offer, but this is often coupled with an inability to allow for alternatives.

A final reflection on the call to Christians to be witnesses in their community and society: in assemblies of believers in the early days it is easy to envisage the story-telling and mutual reflection and encouragement which must have taken place. There is still need for processes such as these. Structuring them into the life of the parish as it is lived at present is difficult. Imaginative use of the Liturgy of the Word in the Eucharistic assembly would provide scope. In smaller 'base-community' type units within the parish it is easier to envisage such exchange. Sustained and effective Christian witness on the part of believers (and in line with everything which is discussed here, believers means all, not just 'lay' believers) requires mutual support, formal or informal. Often it is through the ingenuity of committed individuals that such networks arise. This is an area in which much growth could be fostered, and highly effective on-going learning be facilitated.

7.5.2 Christian Fellowship

From the outset, according to biblical accounts, the followers of 'the Way' banded together. The theme of *community* has been traced in the accounts of the early communities through the metaphor of the body and indeed the mystery of the church as the body of Christ. Communal being and life is integral to the Christian commitment and mission in the world, and therefore to the parish. Opportunities for experiencing Christian fellowship need to be identified and even generated within the parish situation today. In this regard, it is possible that rural parishes have traditions and a stability which work to their advantage. However, even here Christian fellowship is not automatic. In semi-urban or urban situations the reality of parish

community as a place of fellowship is sometimes experienced most vividly at times of need, such as bereavement or tragedy. An openness to the presence and the gift of one another, even across social divisions, is a feature of parish community which must be positively encouraged and even structured by those responsible for the quality of living Christian life and mission in the parish today. The natural dynamic, identified by Bellah, whereby people gravitate into life-style enclaves must not be mistaken for Christian fellowship, even when people there do share an interest and a commitment to faith. Of course, groups of like-minded people can be subsumed into fellowship, provided they are not closed.

The primary expression of *fellowship* in the Christian community is of course the Eucharist – where else is the community as a body, and as Body of Christ more truly itself?. However, the highly individualistic style of the formal celebration of the parish Eucharist makes the experience of fellowship there quite unlikely.¹⁵ Luis Maldonado observes:

In celebration for large, passive congregations in which the faithful ‘attend’ mainly as spectators, the underlying model of the Church is the ‘societal’ model; ... the faithful do at times play a part in the liturgy by answering, singing, and reading, but all this remains at the level of external formalism ... There is no corresponding authentic commitment to the community outside the celebration and in the whole of ecclesial and civil life.¹⁶

In practice, parishioners report a sense of belonging in the Sunday assembly in direct proportion to their involvement in some smaller unity of the parish community, e.g. in a training programme for a ministry.

Extension of the Eucharistic assembly into a social gathering is often, in other places, a feature of parish communities that are much smaller than the average (even rural) parish in Ireland. Moreover, the brevity of the liturgy through the years has

¹⁵ This topic will be discussed in more detail in the next subsection.

¹⁶ ‘Liturgy as Communal Enterprise’, in *Reception*, p. 310.

given rise to an expectation that all will be over within a predictable time. A social dimension is considered more or less superfluous within this frame of reference. On the other hand, informal socialising has traditionally been a feature of church-going in Ireland, and it endures in many communities to this day.

Fellowship can be experienced powerfully when the people gathered for the liturgy are invited to 'minister' to one another in creative ways, e.g. at the Prayer of the Faithful. Energy levels in the assembly rise palpably when time is given in which people can attend to one another as fellow-Christians, and pray for and with one another. The dependence, which is widespread, on the intercession of the ordained in all public prayer greatly disempowers the rest of the baptised. It is no wonder that the priest is expected at each phase of the funeral liturgies to lead the family and community in prayer. Much work has to be done in the Irish parish setting to build up again the leadership which would have been quite natural within gatherings in the domestic setting in the days before Cardinal Cullen, the Synod of Thurles and the Romanising of the Irish Church.¹⁷

Fellowship in the believing community does not remove the reality of social division and conflict. The challenge of building an inclusive community must be taken up by the parish which is committed to development. The primacy of person over role or social status was highlighted in the discussion of the Christian community at Corinth.

7.5.3 Liturgy and Prayer

The centrality of the Eucharist in the life of the community of faith is a point of agreement between the Irish Catholic inheritance, current practice and theological

¹⁷ See pp. 20 ff. above.

underpinnings of the parish today. In penal times in Ireland, the gathering at the Mass-rock, even under threat of imprisonment or death, characterised the Catholic population. Right up to the present, as evidenced in the surveys scanned in Chapter 3, membership of the church is by assumption gauged by and large through attendance at Mass. Paul emphasised the gathering for the Lord's Supper as the ultimate identifying expression of the early Christian communities. And in Vatican II the theology of local Church and, by implication, of the parish emphasises the Eucharist as the event, through which the Church in its local realisation, itself also becomes 'event'. As Rahner envisages it, the Eucharist is the 'most effective and radical sacramental self-realization of the Church'¹⁸

Within the context of the parish which possesses its own unique history and experience, the Eucharist must stand as 'summit and source' not only in theological reality but also in experiential terms for the community present. Thus the language and the symbols must be adapted as far as possible to the local setting. There is no suggestion here of loss of tradition, or of rubric. There is rather an urge to ground these in the local reality. This includes representation of current happenings, of efforts being made in the community to live out Christian commitment, of difficulties being experienced, of achievements, etc. Good communication strategy suggests immediately that such representation be participative. The purpose of referring to current experiences is that they may be reflected on in the light of the Word and the Christian tradition. In passing, it may be noted that the selection of readings in the official Lectionary of the Church is a subject which is greatly in need of attention. For a people who are not versed in Scripture, the insistence that the three-year cycle should represent the full Bible is disingenuous. The effectiveness of the reader is

¹⁸ 'Theology and Spirituality of Pastoral Work in the Parish', p. 89.

something which is more easily within the scope of the parish and should be attended to.

While critique of how life is lived in the contemporary society is an element of the Christian mission, it is arguable that, in the context of the Liturgy of the Word as currently celebrated in the parish, the preacher should refrain from definitive judgements relating to situations in which parishioners are involved. A more dialogical setting would be desirable, and in justice even a right. Gabriel Daly emphasises this point:

Blunt 'common sense' does not qualify a preacher to sail ... into complex theological and moral issues which call for accurate information, sensitivity to the need for careful qualification and immense compassion towards those who are wrestling with these issues. ... [T]he pulpit is not the place for moral crusades of a type ... which does not make it clear that other views, different from those of the preacher, are equally legitimate.¹⁹

Such a situation is not hypothetical, for example, in a town where a bitter strike in the principal industrial concern is dividing the community of the parish. This is not to say that such a situation is ignored in the parish Eucharist - rather that it be represented with recognition of the complexity and the challenge to all to find a basis of unity. The limitations of the homily as a teaching method have already been highlighted.

Moments in the liturgy such as the Prayer of the Faithful must be used to provide a voice for the concerns of the people. In formal gatherings systems may be needed to facilitate this, e.g. an agreed point of submission of prayers/intentions in time for compilation, a 'writer' appointed and supported by parish staff, a competent reader nominated in time to facilitate effective leading of the prayer in the name of the community.

¹⁹ 'The Church: Community of Faith', in *the Furrow* 33, 1983, pp. 410-411.

In the Liturgy of the Eucharist, every effort should be made to draw the assembly into an experience and a realisation of the fact that their lives and Christian commitment are their sacrifice united with Christ, and that his Resurrection is a 'pledge of future glory' for all. To realise that this experience is accessible to all, not as individuals but as a community, and that living their commitment is a matter of how life is lived *in community*, is a challenge in the contemporary Irish parish, where individualism is indicated by the low sense of a need to assemble, as evidenced in the survey responses.²⁰ Maldonado expresses the social dimension of the Eucharist in terms of commitment: .

In the liturgy and especially in the Eucharist, there ought to be a sacramental communion with Christ and the Church, and a concomitant ... commitment to *agapé*. Where these are missing, we succumb to a dangerous sacramentalism.²¹

The difficulties which young people express and the reasons generally for non-attendance at Mass given in the response to the surveys of practice are most often irrelevance leading to boredom. Much work is needed to take seriously this feedback. In Ziebertz's terms it is not enough to hold rigidly to classic theological formulations and judge adversely those for whom this is not a native language. Searching for the 'communication possibilities' may include adaptation of time, place and style of Eucharistic celebration in order to reach possible meeting-points with those for whom the traditional structures no longer have meaning.²² The potential of music in the celebration of the Eucharist is only seldom realised in the Irish parish setting. Where work is done, it concentrates most often on choir rather than on congregation.

²⁰ See p. 72 above.

²¹ 'Liturgy as Communal Enterprise', p. 313.

²² Celebrations of Eucharist 'on site' on completion of the harvest, for example, is a model which could be adapted with effect from the vineyards of Chile. Neighbourhood Masses which gather and

The active role of the community, not just through a few ‘ministers’, but in terms of their lives, concerns and hopes, in the celebration of the Eucharist must be emphasised in every possible way, including the use of language. An introductory word by a member of the congregation can establish an important perspective. ‘Welcome, as we gather to celebrate ... The theme of our Eucharist is ... Fr. ... will preside.’ This is also an opportunity to inform the people in courtesy of any unusual features, e.g. to say who the priest is, if visiting; to welcome those present for a special occasion; etc.

Special provision for the very young, e.g. alternative Liturgy of Word is a practice which is growing, especially in preparation for First Holy Communion. Such initiatives have possibilities and deserve discussion in the context of the catechetical work of the parish as envisaged above. The involvement of a group or committee in co-ordinating and developing the liturgy will arise again in Chapter 9 as part of parish structure. The skills and gifts of people in arts of all kinds, among an educated and articulate population, should be welcomed and allowed to transform liturgical celebrations. Participation by lay people in an inclusive manner in an array of liturgical ministries is implicit in what has been said. The structuring of recruitment, training, commissioning and on-going support of those in liturgical ministries, as in all ministries, is a responsibility of the Parish Priest, but there is no reason why this work cannot be made the subject of a specialised ministry.

The celebration of the sacraments in the parish needs to follow the same principles illustrated by the examples given above in relation to the Eucharist, which are by no means exhaustive. In particular the sacrament of Reconciliation needs to be reflected upon in depth. ‘Communal celebrations’ at present are in most cases

reflect on the life-experiences of the people of a place within a time period such a year offer similar opportunities for meaningful liturgy.

little more than individual rituals happening in one place. Until there is a shared life of faith and commitment in the parish there is no basis for communal reconciliation. The survey findings in Chapter 3 indicated this need for a re-interpretation of this sacrament.²³ The inclusion of other sacramental events in parish Eucharist should be encouraged - baptisms in particular are too easily perceived as private concerns. The requirement that these and other rituals be performed in the Church rather than at home (after Cullen's reforms) is certainly justified in terms of their character as community events. In fact, the liturgy should awaken and embody awareness of the parish in communion not only in the local community but also with the Church universal.

The parish is challenged to support the prayer-life of parishioners that was very much in evidence in the surveys scanned in chapter 3. Traditional patterns have been greatly disrupted by the media revolution described in Chapter 1. Prayer forms which meet the needs of particular groups deserve to be explored. New inclusive symbolisations speak powerfully to the inner needs of modern individuals, e.g. guided imagery, sacred dance. However, the Christian interpretation of the transcendence of God, and the criterion of commitment to the other which is integral to Christianity, must be applied in a critique of such practices.

7.5.4 Christian Service

The service to which the parish is called and which will be discussed here is that which is directly related to its being a community gifted with Christian faith. In the two chapters which follow many more implications of *diakonia* for the parish will be considered.

²³ See p. 73 above.

Christians are, by definition, people of hope, a hope which arises from their belief in Christ and in his Resurrection. What this section highlights is their calling to engender hope through their service to one another in familial and communal environments, within and outside of Church membership. A willingness to do this implies not only conviction, but also a reliance on the resources of faith and hope in every situation.

There is no implication in what has been said that Christians must preach the word where action alone would help. Rather, through their actions, they express a belief in the dignity of every human being as a corollary of Christian faith. In service by its members the parish expresses itself as sacrament of union with God and unity among people.

An obvious application of this service arising from faith is the willingness to pass on faith to the young, in family and in parish settings. Parents fulfil this mission at home and also when they take part in parish-based programmes in preparation for sacraments of initiation. Undertaking ministries of all kinds within the parish, some of which will be explored further in the next two chapters, is a service which is a manifestation of faith.

7.6 SUMMARY

The life of the parish community as a community of believers is diverse, wide-ranging and multifaceted, as the expressions of faith take form within the matrix of life in community. The aspects of the mission of the parish that arise from its shared faith and which is lived out in different ways in different situations, is to *be* church in reality in its time and place and *as* Church to witness to their Christian faith, be united in and through their shared belief, to celebrate liturgy together, and to serve

one another and the wider community by passing on the message of hope in word and deed.

Chapter 8

THE PARISH COMMUNITY AS AN AGENCY OF COMMUNITY SERVICE

I have drawn up the likely profile of the parish in the Irish Roman Catholic context in the previous chapter. It is the life and mission of parish as so envisaged which I shall consider now in another light, namely that of an agency for community care and community development. In this area, as indeed in all aspects of the life of the parish community, the necessity of inculturation and the balancing of this process by maintaining Christian distinctiveness, as discussed in particular in chapter 6, is an enduring challenge.

8.1 CONTEXT

The characteristics of the parish which are relevant to this discussion are the progressive individualisation which marks most modern communities and the social needs which arise either systemically as in the case of those caught in a poverty trap or incidentally as in the case of illness, handicap, grief etc. The existence or absence of social services and of networks of concern, both statutory and voluntary, are of central importance to the parish's consideration of how to express itself as church in the local context. The level of community action already present will also guide the parish in how to shape its involvement in community development. The discerning by parish of how to engage in the human activity of the area is a very localised task. Vatican II encouraged local churches to read the signs of the times, i.e. to analyse, in dialogue with others the factors and forces impacting on people's lives in their concrete situation. As the outcome of this process cannot be pre-empted, what follows will, of necessity be generalised and incomplete.

8.2 PRINCIPLES

In the Irish context the church has a long tradition of involvement in social care services (mainly through the work of the religious orders), often ahead of and independent of state provision. The chequered history of the movement since the 1950s to extend state services featured briefly in Chapter 1 in the account of the Mother and Child controversy.¹ It is no longer possible or necessary for Church, in any manifestation, to match the services which the state can and ought to establish to meet the needs of people in society and therefore in each local community. The principle which governs a parish's involvement in community services and community development today must be that of partnership where possible, initiative where necessary. In the latter case the process is one of raising awareness, supporting self-help and empowerment and mobilising resources. The involvement of parish as Church in the local environment arises from the historical nature of the Christian message and the pastoral character of the Christian mission. Where there is human need or injustice the Christian is called to make real the message of hope and liberation in concrete and constructive ways. The parish as the community of Christians does not fulfil its mission unless it embodies the Christian response.

If the parish is to contribute to the work of community care and community development it must declare itself through some visible and public means – structures and/or facilities – and enter into networks of communication with other agencies in the field. This work needs to be carried out on behalf of the parish by competent persons in whatever capacity is agreed: employees or volunteers, ordained or lay.² In all cases structures for planning, review and accountability must be in

¹ See p. 27 above

² Clearly, the issue of finance is crucial here. The services of a Finance Committee is recommended to enlarge the skills available to the parish in generating and managing resources. Such structures will be discussed in Chapter 9.

place. Finally, whatever the form of engagement on behalf of the parish, it ought to be known to the parish community. The responsibilities of the parish include the structuring and resourcing of such community involvement on behalf of the parish.

8.3 CHALLENGES

The challenges which are implied by what has been said relate primarily to skills and resources. What is under discussion here is not the spontaneous gestures of mutual care and concern which may rightly be expected of the members of a parish community as they encounter one another's need. The focus of this discussion is structured engagement with programmes of community care and community development. The role of parish, as already indicated, is a function of local circumstances. Whatever form the involvement takes, however, it should embody the Christian interpretation of human dignity and destiny. At the same time, the ministry of community action in the name of the parish must be carried out in a manner which is truly dialogical, finding common ground with others who do not necessarily subscribe to the Christian vision.³ In negotiations and planning the parish ministers are challenged to earn their places at the table by virtue of the worthwhileness of their contribution and their capacity to co-operate in carrying out of the enterprise in question. Examples will be given in the next section.

A corollary to the challenges of finding the skills and resources is that of knowledge – it is essential that parish personnel work to keep up to date their information on the social services, the systems of access and delivery, and the points of contact with these.

³ This presentation reflects the vision of Vatican II from Chapters 5 and 6 above.

8.4 PRACTICE

In keeping with the theology of parish as Church in its local setting, the discussion of parish practice as a community agency will be systematised using the four-dimensional scheme of teaching and witness, fellowship, liturgy and prayer, and service. The rationale of applying these axes in analysis of praxis is to characterise it as action of *Church*, which it is only when the four elements are present and operative.

8.4.1 Christian Teaching and Witness

The engagement of parish through its commissioned ministers in programmes of community action is a witness to the Christian belief that all human life is good, redeemed in Christ and destined for transformation; that the reign or kingdom of God, proclaimed by Christ is life experienced to its fullest potential. Therefore the needs which result from human tragedy, or those which arise from systemic injustice, call out to parish as Church - committed as it must be to promoting the 'coming of the kingdom'.

The sponsoring by parish of programmes of Community Education, to take one example, is a witness to the Christian belief in the dignity and destiny of the person. While Human Psychology, on its own account, offers effective means of behaviour modification and improvement of life-skills, in the Christian context an entirely new dimension may, by agreement, be introduced. Clearly the language, images and idiom must respect the primary purpose of those involved, be that coping skills, personal development or the like. But possibilities may be held out in ways that do not breach the ethical boundaries of good practice. Likewise in areas such as stress management and assertiveness, the highly individualistic ethos of many programmes can be complemented or even challenged through the Christian

perspective. Thus the management of stress by simply moving it on to someone else can be replaced by the reduction of stress all round through the introduction of new perspectives from the Christian stance. One last example may be given. By the explicit introduction of the Christian resources, training in technical competence for dealing with life-situations can be enlarged by empowerment through faith.

8.4.2 Christian Fellowship

The activities of the parish as a community agency, because they take place within a local community setting, will be relational rather than bureaucratic. (That is not to say that the parish may not have to operate within bureaucratic systems, for example when negotiating funding.) Whether in direct contact as in programmes of support, which will be discussed, or within the networks of other community agencies, contacts will be personal rather than impersonal, and will be based on common interests. The Christian attitudes of respect and acceptance should underpin the relationship in which ministers who represent parish as a community agency are involved. These Christian qualities will not be expected to make up for, but will rather enhance the competence and regard for ethical standards already referred to in the challenges outlined above.

It is important to note that this description of the ministry as personal and relational does not preclude the kind of advocacy work which may not always be free of agitation or even conflict.

8.4.3 Liturgy and Prayer

In the course of ministry for parish as a community agency, the facility of the minister with symbolic representation, with reflection and with ritual (all in secular

rather than religious sense) can be offered to processes and planning. It is not implied here that only parish representatives will have interest or ability in these areas.

A Community Summer Camp would be an example of a project to which the parish may be committed, hopefully in partnership with agencies such as the Youth Service. In the planning stages the resources of all concerned are pooled with a view to providing as varied and balanced a programme as possible. While the involvement of the parish is primarily a witness to its care, its contribution may also benefit the project along the lines mentioned above. The commitment of the parish as organisation through commissioning of personnel to the work of community action gives credibility to the religion it professes. Moreover, the common interest in and concern for the human condition can lead to mutually enriching exchanges.

Finally and most importantly, the community action of the parish should be represented, celebrated and nourished in the parish liturgy, as already discussed in chapter 7.

8.4.4 Christian Service

In a situation where the parish is seriously committed to engagement with its wider community, with staff, volunteers, structures and possibly facilities such as rooms, hall or Centre in place, the scope is wide indeed. The following examples are by no means put forward as exhaustive. Experience shows that they are feasible as programmes with which the parish can become involved.

(1) Support Groups such as RAINBOWS, which is a peer support group programme for children, young people and adults, who are grieving; or bereavement groups, for example those specifically targeted on loss through suicide or loss of a

partner can be significant social interventions. Great responsibility rests with the sponsors of such groups e.g. the selection and training of facilitators and the integrity of programmes used. Parent-and-toddler groups offer an opportunity of informal socialisation in the company of parents and at the same time provide a support network for the parents themselves. Experience shows that this kind of group can become a consciousness-raising event and lead to further undertakings. Senior Citizens groups can supplement services such as Home Helps and offer social outlets for those in danger of being isolated.

(2) Statutory and voluntary organisations which are committed to social service will gladly avail of contact points with the community. A few examples from experience will illustrate the point. In programmes such as 'Community Mothers' – a programme of home visitation by trained volunteer-mothers to new mothers - the partnership between the statutory and voluntary sectors demonstrates their complementarity. While the Health Authority is able and willing to provide sponsorship and resources, and the Public Health Nurse is in contact with the young mothers, the parish and community development network are in touch with potential volunteers and are well placed to facilitate communication between them and the authorities. The Health Services welcome the opportunity to place services such as the Well-Baby clinic in locations which are near to areas of population, and in this way fulfil their role. The Money Advice and Budgeting Service (set up by the Department of Community, Social and Family Affairs) are glad that its facilities are promoted in the course of other work in the parish. Voluntary Counselling services see in a Parish Centre an ideal setting for their work. In the Irish context the need for counselling services is acute as there is no provision for this area within the public health service. The parish is rarely in a position, financially, to sponsor such a

service, but can explore the systems of state grant-aid to voluntary organisations who carry the administrative responsibilities.

(3) When a parish is recognised as an agency of care it will be invited to support other networks by sharing facilities, time and expertise in once-off projects, in fund-raising, etc. The 'language and idiom' of those who are in need is help and support. The message is at least implicitly Christian by the fact that the parish declares itself actively concerned. In this connection, there is a narrow boundary between claiming (and proclaiming) Christian distinctiveness in the work of service, and honouring the other *as* other. In the apparent asymmetry of the relationships which arise it is imperative to establish the ground of common humanity, of equal dignity, and of justice. Within this a mutual sharing of meaning may occur with time.

(4) As already discussed, the involvement of parish in community development, assuming its capacity and readiness, will depend on the extent of such activity already present. In some cases initiative is needed. In others, parish is invited to support what is already under way. Likewise, action for justice (e.g. relating to housing issues) on environmental problems (e.g. planning) or on employment: the committed parish will take account of needs, of how the community is responding and how it can show solidarity.

(5) The question of how the community is providing for its young people is an abiding and challenging one. To take one example: the need for summer activity which is accessible to all in the community by a reasonable pricing structure is recognised as acute. Parish involvement in such a project is a statement of its care for young people. What has been said about partnership and initiative applies to a project such as this. Given that it concentrates on holiday time, this is also a golden

opportunity to make its facilities such as schools, in so far as they are vested in Church Trust, available to the community. The issue of youth at risk, e.g. early school-leavers, is indeed challenging, and one which requires specific skill and resourcing. If this need exists and is not being addressed, the parish which is socially aware and active has a role in advocacy at least.

8.5 SUMMARY

The extent and style of the parish's expression of itself as a community agency depends on: (1) the capacity of the parish leadership and parish personnel to engage seriously with community care and community development work, as well as the commitment of the parish community to resource them; (2) the needs of the community and the area; and (3) the level of community services, the existence or absence of networks of concern.

The principles guiding the involvement of parish personnel in community services should be *partnership* where possible, *initiative* where necessary. Structures for co-operation with other agencies, for resourcing and accountability are essential.

The parish is challenged in its commitment to participate in community action to: (1) set and maintain standards as required in community work; (2) earn and keep its place in the ongoing processes of planning and development; and (3) contribute from the resources of its Christian perspective, in a respectful dialogue.

Finally it is suggested on the basis of experience that there are many significant projects in which parish can be actively involved, and in this way fulfil its mission to promote the reign of God by building up the human community.⁴

⁴ See p. 130 above and LG, 13.

Chapter 9

ORGANISATION AND LEADERSHIP IN THE PARISH COMMUNITY AS THE LOCAL REALISATION OF THE CHURCH WITH A MISSION

In this chapter I shall discuss the development in the parish of structures which reflect the theology of parish contained in this dissertation, and which are appropriate for the present-day Irish social context which has been characterised.

The love-patriarchalism which was described in Chapter 4¹ has influenced the structures of the Christian Church throughout its history, beginning in New Testament and in the early centuries, and may indeed have served the mission of the church. It is clearly recognisable in the hierarchical structures of the Roman Catholic tradition to this day. However, in the modern situation, commitment to the primacy of love as *transcending* structure must be balanced by critical reflection on the import and the power of structure.² In practice, programmes of spiritual renewal which do not address such critical questions run the risk of perpetuating basic inequalities that are not compatible with the theology of church as community.³ It is essential that hierarchical structures which are exclusive are not defended through the rhetoric of 'spirituality'. In the modern climate of democracy and participation, every effort should be made to ensure that the Church in its structures expresses itself as what it truly is: a community gifted with the Spirit to receive, interpret and understand, in each age and place, the self-communication of God in Christ. This activity of the Church and the Spirit has in it the power to lead to a universal Church

¹ See p. 118 above.

² This discussion is reminiscent of the *communio – mysterium* debates at the Synod of Bishops of 1985. Cardinal Ratzinger is quoted (see p. 175 above) 'It is essential ... to put forward the Church as *mysterium*, transcending itself towards Christ. The Synod cannot make the distribution of power its primary topic'.

³ See, for example, M. Hornsby-Smith, *The Politics of Spirituality, a Study of a Renewal Process in an English Diocese*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

which is a communion of local communities.⁴ The belief that Church is a community must be *embodied* in its organisational structures or it remains an abstraction.

9.1 CONTEXT

In the parish community, understood as the actualization of the Church in its time and place, the role of structure is to support and facilitate the life and mission of the whole community of the baptised. On this view, structures in which the community can participate are essential. The living-out by parish of its identity as making present the church in its time and place has been explored at some length in the previous two chapters. Throughout the discussion the need for good organisational structures upheld by good leadership was evident.

The traditional significance of the parish within the fabric of local community in Ireland is a consequence of the history of the Roman Catholic Church in Irish society. Contemporary urbanisation has changed this situation to varying degrees, most noticeably in newly-developed areas. The importance of parish to life in the community has changed remarkably during the 1990s as evidenced in the surveys of religious belief and practice analyses in Chapter 3. The gradual re-interpretation of religion and its role in society is a concomitant of this process. In this situation reference to the views or interests of the Church – the parish – is no longer automatic. To be relevant in the life of its local community the parish must become visible and active through recognisable structures and connections.

⁴ The necessary dynamic is one of discernment. See p. 190, n. 126 above

9.2 PRINCIPLES

The development of participative structures at parish level must take into account, as outer boundaries, the requirements of Church Law, so that in building itself up as Church, realized and made present, it also remains in communion with the Church universal. The normal juridical position is that the Parish Priest is held to be ultimately responsible and accountable to the bishop for the parish.⁵ Some canonical restructuring has taken place in parishes, by agreement with the authorities.⁶ Such change in practice is a useful testing ground, and expands the range of options available at a time when local conditions vary from place to place.

While the process of developing structures for sharing leadership and decision-making may be termed 'democratisation' it is important to distinguish between church as community and democracy as a political system. The former operates by a process of discernment, such as has been described,⁷ while the latter functions by majority rule. Where structures are put in place for participation by the laity in the planning and implementation of the pastoral activity of the parish the status of committees, Councils, etc. should be documented and agreed.⁸

Criteria for membership of bodies such as Councils and committees are necessary, and are in keeping with the exercise of responsibility by the community for the direction of policies and plans in the parish. Such criteria ought to be developed through dialogue within the community, facilitated by the leadership bodies within the parish, in the light of the relevant theological and sociological

⁵ Canon 515, 1

⁶ For example, four parishes in the Archdiocese of Dublin are administered by teams with moderators. This arrangement can only be set up at the discretion of the bishop.

⁷ See p. 190, n. 126 above.

⁸ A helpful guide on structures which are being found effective is *The New Practical Guide for Parish Pastoral Councils*, William J. Rademacher with Marliss Rogers, Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-third Publications, 1988.

issues .⁹ This is not to suggest that councils/committees should be coteries of like-minded people. The purpose of establishing structures is to provide channels through which all parishioners can know about and make their views known regarding the happenings in the parish, decisions pending, etc. Representative bodies cannot claim to fulfil their purpose if they are not committed to seeking ways of communicating regularly and openly with the people of the parish. The purpose of groups/committees is to develop particular aspects of the life and mission of the parish. It is necessary that there be systems in place whereby committees work in harmony with the overall ethos of the parish. While much of the work of committees and membership of other bodies will be on a voluntary basis, the parish should support and resource their work, e.g. with office services, etc.

Finally, in the Irish context at present, there may be a temptation to look to participation by the laity merely as a means of supplementing the decrease in the number of priests available to parishes. To call on the lay people of the parish to become active in the organisation, maintenance and development of their parish only because there are not sufficient priests to do so would surely be to do ‘the right deed for the wrong reason’, which according to the poet T.S. Eliot amounts to ‘the greatest treason’.

9.3 CHALLENGES

In the Irish context, as in the Roman Catholic Church world-wide before Vatican II, lay people in the Church have been for centuries the passive recipients of the teaching, sanctifying and ruling ministries of the clergy. It is difficult for priests and lay people to dismantle this mind-set, especially when it is still so enshrined in the

⁹ For example, in Holy Family Parish, Askea there are three criteria for membership of the Pastoral Council, namely (1) commitment to the theology of Vatican II (2) commitment to work within diocesan policies, and (3) commitment to participate in programmes of education and training.

law of the Church, and the task of undertaking the mission in partnership is proving very challenging.

The development of an effective organisational structure for the parish requires commitment to the concept of church as community, a concept which is theologically founded. Thus the parish as the community of the baptised is called to be actively engaged in all aspects of the life and mission of the community of believers. The differentiation of role and function is carried by the basic *communio* between the members. The teaching on communion, however, must not be used to mask the power struggles which characterise any living community, including church community. A major challenge which echoes the struggles of the very earliest Christian communities is the resolution of conflict without loss of *communio*.¹⁰

The purpose of the groups needs to be carefully defined and constantly refreshed in terms of its service to the parish as a whole. The overall structure needs to challenge groups to remain open to new members and to the changing needs, interests and views of the community. At the same time the members of committees, Councils or groups within parish will have opportunities for theological education/training and on-going learning. They should then help the parish community to grow in understanding and commitment. All involved are faced with the challenge of identifying constructive and destructive movements within the life of the parish and of working to preserve unity.

The parish as organisation is challenged, also, to allow its communal structures to draw it into networks of communication with agencies within the wider community in the manner suggested in Chapter 8.

¹⁰ See the account of Corinthians, pp. 116-117 above.

9.4 PRACTICE

The familiar four-dimensional scheme will be used to present some reflections on how the parish operates as an organisation.

9.4.1 Christian Teaching and Witness

The details of the organisational structures of the parish must reflect the nature of the parish as church – they must witness to the values of the kingdom of God as presented by Christ. What this means in practice needs to be worked out in the local setting by the people concerned.

There are three sources for the process of Christian discernment in parish settings or elsewhere. These are: Scripture, tradition and the social reality of the place and time. It is this process, carried out in a faith context attentive to the Spirit, which marks off even highly participative structures as different from democracy.

In the process of decision-making in relation to policy and planning the concept of consensus operates in a similar way. A Parish Pastoral Council, for example, if it operates in faith, will search for a way forward without the regard for winning and losing which are part of group processes that are entirely political. Equally, in the search for consensus minority voices are listened to in the belief that the prophet is often in a minority of one. Consensus implies that all, in the end, are able to subscribe to the position taken as consonant with the mission of the Council, even though it may not be the first preference of all, a situation that would often be clearly unattainable.

Processes of elections of delegates, officers, etc. must also be characterised within parish organisations by a search for the right person, rather than by competition. The application, where appropriate, of the criteria which have been

discussed, is not to be an exercise of power, but rather of responsibility, and whatever judgements must be made ought to be made in charity.

The acceptance of present canonical rulings that Pastoral Councils, Finance Committees, etc. are consultative in nature calls on the faith of members. At this point in history this is what obtains, normally, within the Roman Catholic tradition. It must be used to serve the mission now without precluding a vision of change and even commitment to work for change where that appears to be necessary. Change in praxis often precedes change in principle.

The representative function of parish structures needs to be honoured. For this purpose some parishes have developed a concept of Parish Forum.¹¹ This is an open meeting held three or four times yearly. All are invited and there are no prerequisites or expectations. Experience shows that independent facilitation of such an event makes it possible for Parish Priest, leadership teams, Pastoral Council and others to listen attentively. This is important, as the Forum can be an important source of information on views and attitudes within the parish community. .

Parish Pastoral Councils and constituent committees need to check continuously that the work they are doing reflects Christian principles. In turn they will be in a position to give to others the benefits of their insights. Their membership, active engagement, and promotion of the gospel message bear witness to their Christian faith.

¹¹ On review of the operation of the Council structure in Holy Family Parish, Askea, in 1997, it was found that the Council needed more access to the parish community as a whole, than that which was afforded through its network of subgroups. The Forum is an open meeting which is held three or four times each year, to which all are invited and at which all are welcome to raise points of interest or concern. Matters currently being dealt with by the Council are also discussed. It has been established that there will be no recruitment of volunteers at Parish Forum meetings.

9.4.2 Christian Fellowship

Roles held by members or groups within the parish community – leadership, ministry, etc. do not take precedence over the relationship of equality between parish members. Thus functions within the parish are secondary – and the invitation to membership in the family of believers and to share the table of the Lord's Supper establishes all in equality. The traditional division between priest and people can be resolved within this context, without any undermining of the responsibilities attaching to ordination or the administrative role of the Parish Priest. The mission of all to be sign and sacrament in their various areas of living, working and playing is respected, because of a basic recognition of their dignity as baptised Christians. Within the ethos of Christian fellowship a mutual co-operation and supportiveness can grow strong. Because it is based on truth it is characterised by freedom.

Socio-economic differences within the community can be superseded through cultivation of Christian fellowship. This vision does not preclude a commitment to social justice or action to relieve poverty. It does ensure that the dignity of those who receive is not offended, and the neediness of those who give is not concealed. In fellowship the mutual interdependence of community members can be experienced.

9.4.3 Liturgy and Prayer

The organisational structures of the parish can be tested by the question: in how far do they build up the assembly which gathers to celebrate the Eucharist? Among the groups which are established by most parishes committed to development is one dedicated to preparation for liturgical celebrations. Much has been said above on the subject of the Parish Eucharist, and the importance of inculturation so that the total

life of the community is celebrated and nourished. This is a task for the whole community and certainly for all those who are charged with leadership in the parish, or voluntarily accept commission to work for its growth.

In the course of their work all groups of parishioners who meet together for any purpose however material its focus, e.g. finance, should be encouraged to establish their common ground and frame of reference by a time of formal prayer at some time in the meeting.

9.4.4 Christian Service

The motif of service lies at the very heart of the Christian mission. The paradox of the gospel is presented by means of a variety of images about finding life through losing it. The organisational structures of the parish offer channels through which members of the community can serve the life and mission of their Church as it is realised and present in their own time and place. This ministry of service is not identical, as has already been emphasised, with their Christian mission in the world.

To the task of service in the parish people bring their gifts, their experience and their time. The parish and the Church universal grow through such generosity. Unless the parish serves the work of spreading the gospel and of responding to human need, then the organisation is not functioning as Church. Within the parish groups such as a Communications Committee give an important service to the community. By keeping the people informed they contribute to the inclusion and sense of belonging which is called for in every public gathering in the parish. By involving itself in the money and other material affairs the Finance Committee can help ensure that the parish will have the resources it needs to carry out its mission. Creative approaches are needed, but so also is a theology which presents the giving

of material support to parish as a concrete expression of belonging and of fulfilling mission. In this connection, systems of pledging a percentage of monthly income could be developed. Such systems respect the differences in earnings of the members of the community, and at the same time recognise that all are called to participate. It is necessary that funds are available if supportive programmes and facilities are to be sponsored by the parish and the diocese.

It may be noted here, also, that the parish while itself church and constitutive of church, needs to express its relationship with the Church universal. While this link is often thought of in juridical terms, and conceptualised theologically in terms of *communio*, it can and should be realised in concrete terms through service, i.e. material support where possible for other local churches who are in need. Systems of twinning might be adopted on the model of the civic communities of towns and cities. Paul encouraged such practice in the early communities in which he ministered. (2 Cor. 9).

9.5 SUMMARY

Whatever structures are put in place it is essential that they are suitable to the circumstances and profile of the parish, that they are committed to facilitating the whole community and its mission. To do this they need to take account of the best wisdom available through the human sciences, adapted to the work of the kingdom. As a guide for planning and reviewing structures, the familiar scheme can be invoked: it is essential that all policies, systems and procedures within the parish community are based on sound Christian principles, that they nourish fellowship, develop the liturgical life of the parish and support active and effective Christian service.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from Part 1 of the dissertation that the society of the Republic of Ireland up to the 1960s fitted Luckmann's category of 'pre-industrial'. In it the 'sacred universe' was supported, by and large, by the entire social structure. In this setting the Roman Catholic Church as the church of the majority of the population was in a position to be, and was in fact, largely integralist in its self-understanding, its policies and its practice. While this situation did facilitate in its time the religious life of the faithful, it did not prepare the Church well for adaptation to a social context which has been changing rapidly during the last forty years.

The emphasis on rational organization and on personal freedom which characterises modernity are progressively more evident in Irish society since the beginning of economic expansion in 1958. Within a greatly altered economic, social and cultural context, the place of religion and of the Church is gradually being redefined. The rise of specialisation within society has reduced the influence of the Church, and altered the role of religion in the lives of Irish people. While the idea of 'secularisation' is invoked to describe the removal of religion from its formerly-held role in the social structure, the concept of 'individualization' offers an alternative interpretation, which has the merit of explaining the enduring high levels of religious belief among Irish people.

An increasingly functionalist understanding of religion is growing in Ireland especially among young people, which (at least in theory) uncouples religious belief from necessary allegiance to church. However, a strongly substantivist view of religion also persists, together with a more critical appraisal of their church, certainly on the part of Catholics. While church-based rites of passage (with the possible

exception of marriage) continue to be observed by a large majority of Irish Catholics, the indications are that active membership is progressively becoming a choice which is freely made. It is reasonable to expect, then, a smaller but more committed membership of church in the future, a situation which lends itself to a heightened awareness and experience of church as community especially in the local context of parish.

The theological foundations for a self-understanding of church as Christian community were explored in Part II. From the earliest days the followers of Jesus banded together in a fellowship of faith and life which, while it did not remove them from the civic and social spheres of their lives, gave them a corporate identity, and greatly transformed their interpretation of their relationship to their wider societies. Throughout history this relationship has been typically dialectical: on the one hand there has always been a need for inculturation of church, and on the other hand it is Christian distinctiveness which gives witness to the transforming power of the gospel. As they negotiated a path between these poles, from the earliest days the Christian communities of the church were marked by their *koinonia*, *martyria*, *leitourgia*, and *diakonia*, and, at the same time, were always in need of greater authenticity. To this end, critical and self-critical reflection in the light of the story and practice of Jesus at the very inception of the movement that was to become Christianity, in the light of tradition, and of cultural and social analysis of its immediate context, is always essential for the church.

A milestone within the Roman Catholic tradition was the second Vatican Council of the 1960s. The self-understanding which evolved in the Council reflected a renewed appropriation of its biblical and patristic sources interpreted in the light of history and modern scholarship. The ecclesiology of Vatican II has retrieved a self-

understanding of church as primarily mystery and sacrament of union with God and unity of humanity. Against a background of post-Reformation centralization, the Council's emphasis on the essentially historical and contextualised nature of church has led to a rediscovery within Roman Catholicism of the theological significance of the local church. Thus, not only are national and diocesan churches but also parishes invited to understand themselves, not as mere administrative units, but rather as manifestations in their place and time of the universal church. At the same time they are challenged to take seriously their responsibility, locally as well as globally, for the church's mission.

Part III of the dissertation engaged with the details of the discerning and planning, the action and the evaluation, i.e. the *praxis* of the life and mission of the parish community in present-day Irish context. Only a Christian community which expresses itself in and through the medium of its social and cultural context can fulfill its mission. At the same time, it does so by its distinctively Christian way of life as a faith community. The parish community, if it is to be fully itself as a realization of church, must experience the 'event' of church especially in its celebration of the Eucharist. It must, at the same time, remain in union with its bishop and diocese, and with them, continue to be in communion with the church universal.

The polarization of society which has accompanied industrialization and urbanization challenges the church in Ireland to evaluate its life, its mission and its witness in this context. In the early Christian communities neglect or oppression of the poor was considered a serious negation of the spirit of the gospel and the unity of the church. Throughout the Church's history the call to serve where there is need and to seek justice has been a hallmark of proclaiming the gospel. Vatican II

endorsed these views, and was intended as an exercise in dialogue with the existential reality of the contemporary social setting of the church. Clearly, socially responsible use of the Church's resources, which in the Irish situation are considerable, is an essential element of its witness. Essential, also, is church engagement in social and political debate, advocacy on behalf of those neglected or unjustly treated, and direct action to relieve poverty. In its work of service in contemporary Irish society, within the local community of the parish as in the wider domain, the principle of partnership where possible, initiative where necessary was put forward.

The hierarchical structure of the church has had the effect of playing down the essential membership and mission of those baptized but non-ordained. Strategic planning towards more participative structures must not be undertaken for purely pragmatic purposes in times when the church is in transition, as it is in Ireland today. Rather, from a strong theological foundation, namely the anointing of all the faithful at baptism to share in the priestly, prophetic and kingly role of Christ (AA 2) , true partnership in life and mission needs to become operative and evident within the church, beginning with the parish community.

The reflections, positions and proposals which comprise the final part of this dissertation, as the application within the parish of the sociological and theological analyses of Parts I and II respectively, are not at first view expressly radical. They are, however, presented with the conviction that, if implemented, they would release the inherent dynamism of the gospel message in ways which, in the contemporary Irish social context, would prove very radical indeed.

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