The mystical Body of Christ and communion ecclesiology: historic parallels

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The Mystical Body of Christ and Communion Ecclesiology: Historical Parallels

Recognizing that the Church cannot be encompassed by a single and eternal ecclesiology, and that there are stages in the development of the Church's self-understanding, the author examines the history and development of two of the dominant twentieth century models: the earlier Mystical Body eccesiologies, and the post-conciliar Communion/Koinonia models. They contain interesting parallels, one of which is the risk of ignoring the concrete Church - the mystery manifested in history. What ecclesiological models may next rise to dominance?

Articles and books treating communion ecclesiology often begin by recalling the claim made at the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops (and repeated by Pope John Paul II) that the ecclesiology of communion 'is the central and fundamental idea' of the documents of the Second Vatican Council. During the 1970s and 1980s, the various images and models of the Church proposed by Vatican II - body of Christ, sacrament, and especially people of God - gradually gave way to increased emphasis on the notion of communion as a comprehensive category. Walter Kasper argued around the time of the synod: 'For the Church, there is only one way into the future: the way pointed by the Council, the full implementation of the Council and its communion ecclesiology.' While Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, later called communion ecclesiology the 'one basic ecclesiology'.

These statements recall the enthusiasm generated by another ecclesiological model recovered by Catholics decades earlier: the model of the Church as the mystical body of Christ. During the 1920s and 1930s, Paul's organic image for the Christian community burst onto the scene, a theological revival led by figures like Romano Guardini, Karl Adam, Erich Przywara, and Emile Mersch and eventually endorsed by Pius XII. The confident claim of the 1985 synod evokes the finality with which Pius XII spoke in 1943:

If we would define and describe this true Church of Jesus Christ – which is the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Roman Church – we shall find nothing more noble, more sublime, or more divine than the expression ‘the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ’ – an expression which springs from and is, as it were, the fair flowering of the repeated teaching of the Sacred Scriptures and the holy Fathers.4

The following essay explores some of the historical parallels between these two twentieth-century models and observes some of their shared problems. I am interested in reflecting on past developments in ecclesiology and in looking toward future theological reflection on the Church. Over the past three decades, the use of the elastic and encompassing concept of communion as a lens for interpreting the Council has generated both significant consensus and some debate. But history suggests that, like the model of mystical body, today’s ecclesiology of communion will exert its influence and then give way to new and complementary ways of talking about the Church.

Church models in history and the Church in history

The New Testament offers multiple images of the Christian community. The Church is a flock, a field, a temple, the bride and body of Christ, a holy priesthood, God’s people – one study counts over ninety different designations.5 Each image says something about the Church community, none says everything. At different points over the past century, one or another of these images emerged (or an extra-biblical image was adopted) as a kind of key, an attempt to integrate all the various insights offered by this plurality of images and so offer a synthetic vision of Church, an ecclesiology. Avery Dulles famously introduced models to ecclesiology, highlighting this second order attempt at synthesis: ‘When an image is employed reflectively and critically to deepen one’s theoretical understanding of a reality it becomes what is today called a “model”.’6 Church models are rarely dreamt up and imposed on the community; instead, most are drawn from scripture or theological reflection or cultural forms as a way of interpreting, explaining, and arranging data already present to

6. Avery Dulles, Models of the Church (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974) 21. Joseph A. Komonchak argues that, while a pluralism of Church images exists at a ‘first order’ of reflection, it is precisely the task of the ecclesiologist ‘to attempt a critical and systematic integration of all the insights generated by the first-order images’ (‘The Synod of 1985 and the Notion of the Church’, Chicago Studies 26 [1987] 330-45, at 343). My goal is not to demonstrate this claim, but simply to illustrate how in recent history this integration has occurred.
the student of theology or the active parishioner. For Dulles, models are not only explanatory, but also exploratory; that is, they both summarize what we know and lead heuristically in new directions. Ecclesiological models 'catch on' when they account for both doctrinal claims and people's experience, and when they offer an accessible pattern for addressing important questions. Then, a constellation takes shape that provides a new view, further insight into the reality that is the Church. This essay studies Church models in their historical development. To a certain extent, the five, and later six, models Dulles identified (Church as institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald, servant, and community of disciples) function in his comparative approach as a-temporal ideals. But models have a history: they emerge, have an influence, and then fade or are subsumed into new models or perspectives. Church models, in and of themselves, say very little. But different models privilege different sets of questions, and it is largely the questions of an era that determine which models come to the fore. Thus, on the one hand, the societas perfecta model – paradigmatic from 1540 to 1940 – privileged the visible and institutional aspects of the Church and served the Catholic response both to the Reformation challenge and to the claims of the emerging nation states of Europe. On the other hand, Vatican II's language of 'people of God' privileged the themes of baptismal equality and the Church's eschatological orientation, offering categories for post-conciliar questions concerning the role of the laity and Church reform. The models that emerge are an insight into those questions and issues facing the community; they are the shorthand for the concerns of a time.

The following paragraphs explore parallels between two twentieth-century models: the mystical body ecclesiology of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s and the communion ecclesiology of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. In skeletal form, I chart the recent history of reflection on the Church, asking of each of these two ecclesiological interpretations: Where did it begin? How did it take shape? What was or might be its subsequent history? These two models share common roots, they have been employed in theological accounts and Church teaching in similar ways, and they are marked by some of the same problems. As earlier exclusive appeals to the Church as mystical body were later complemented by the language of people of God, so it seems likely that today's focus on communion will be complemented by other language and new, or newly recovered, models.

7. Dulles, Models of the Church, 22-23.
8. Nicholas M. Healy helpfully points out that it is not the ecclesiological model that is most significant, but rather the various construals that govern the model's use (Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000] 45). This observation suggests that an historical approach is valuable in coming to understand more clearly what guides the use of a particular model.
This shifting of models follows the force of time, but it also flows from the models themselves. For both mystical body and communion ecclesiology, as they have been developed by some theologians and appropriated by the Magisterium, have shown a tendency to account inadequately for the character of the Church as 'historic subject'. The term 'historic subject' is used here in a way roughly equivalent to Nicholas Healy's category 'concrete Church', a category he warns should not be 'thought of reductively as merely the visible or empirical Church in contradistinction to its more “spiritual” or “theological” aspects. Rather, the latter “aspects”, including most fundamentally the active presence of the Holy Spirit, are constitutive of the concrete religious body. Appeal to the historic subject does not dismiss the Church's ultimate source in the triune God; it does not, in a kind of ecclesiological Nestorianism, pit Church as historic subject against Church 'as mystery'. The categories 'historic subject' and 'concrete Church' do, nevertheless, emphasize the reality of the Church's agency in history, its human, social, limited existence and activity in time. Insofar as Church models fail to fully attend to the Church as historic subject, they risk an ecclesiological Monophysitism in which the Church's divine source, its character as mystery, absorbs or ignores the concrete, historical community. This tendency can be seen over the last century in versions of mystical body theology and communion eccesiologies that speak less comfortably about change or reform and that are less able to explain and explore difficult pastoral issues. Somewhat ironically, it is precisely this discomfort with the categories of history evident in these models that gives way to history. Time pushes their claims for eternal and universal significance toward other ways of describing the Church.

Mystical body ecclesiology

The idea that the Church is the 'body of Christ' goes back to the earliest reflections on Christian community, the letters of Paul. 'Now you are Christ's body, and individually parts of it.' Authors throughout the first millennium repeatedly drew on this Pauline metaphor to link the realities

10. The term comes from the International Theological Commission: "Mystery" here refers to the Church as deriving from the Trinity, while "historic subject" has to do with the Church as a historical agent, contributing to history's overall direction. "The people of God is simultaneously mystery and historic subject, in such a fashion that the mystery constitutes the historic subject and the historic subject discloses the mystery. ('Select Themes of Ecclesiology on the Occasion of the Eighth Anniversary of the Closing of the Second Vatican Council', in International Theological Commission: Texts and Documents 1969-1985, ed. Michael Sharkey [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989] 267-304, at 274).


12. 1 Cor 12:27. See also Rom 12:4-8; 1 Cor 10:17; 12:12-31; Eph 1:22-23; 2:16; 4:1-6; Col 1:18; 1:24; 2:19; 3:15. In Romans and 1 Corinthians, Christ is equated with the entire body that is the community. In Ephesians and Colossians, Christ is described as head of the body.
of Christ, Church, and Eucharist — speaking of Christ’s ‘mystical body’ present in the Eucharist as signifying and realizing the ‘true body’ (verum corpus) of Christ that is the Church. With the controversies of Berengar of Tours in the eleventh century and the resultant increased emphasis on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the adjectives were reversed. Subsequent theology so identified Christ’s physical body with the Eucharist that the Eucharist became the verum corpus; the Church became the corpus mysticum.\(^{13}\) Appearing in medieval treatises on Christ’s grace of headship and in spiritual manuals of the Tridentine and early modern eras, the theme of the mystical body of Christ became tangential to treatments of the Church preoccupied with the mechanics of ecclesiastical structures. Responding to the Reformation challenge to papacy and hierarchy, Catholic Counter-Reformation theology asserted just those elements under attack. Over time, treatises on the Church emerged describing it not with Paul’s organic image, but defining it in the jurisdictional language of political theory — a ‘perfect society’ complete in itself and subordinate to no other.\(^{14}\)

**The roots of a model**

Only in the nineteenth century did the theme of the mystical body emerge as the basis for a systematic account of the Church.\(^{15}\) The ecclesiologist of Romantic Idealism, Johann Adam Möhler (1796-1838), drew from Paul and patristic sources a vision of the Church as a living, developing organism. The genius of this Tubingen theologian was to consider the Church not simply as the bearer of the mystery of faith, but as itself an aspect of this mystery.\(^{16}\) The Church cannot be reduced to its institutional structures, but is in its essence a deeper reality, the mystery of God’s presence to human beings. Möhler thus set the stage for modern ecclesiology by offering the question: What is the relationship between this deeper dimension, the Church as mystery, and the Church’s outward historical forms? His early work proposed a creative and dynamic answer to this question, one that stressed the activity of the Spirit in individual and community. As the years passed, Möhler’s dialogue with Protestantism

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and his attempt to clarify his presentation of the God-world relationship led him from a vision of the Spirit animating community to a christological, incarnational ecclesiology.17 "Thus, the visible Church, from the point of view here taken, is the Son of God himself, everlastingly manifesting himself among men in a human form, perpetually renovated, and eternally young — the permanent incarnation of the same, as in Holy Writ, even the faithful are called "the body of Christ"."

Möhler's view of the Church as the continuation of the Incarnation in space and time influenced the nineteenth-century Roman school of Giovanni Perrone (1794-1876), Carlo Passaglia (1812-87), Klemens Schrader (1820-75), Johann Baptist Franzelin (1816-86), and especially Matthias Joseph Scheeben (1835-88). These theologians offered neither a narrow neoscholasticism nor creative systems, rather the Roman school represented a conservative attempt to synthesize biblical, patristic, and Scholastic themes — something of an advance on the theology of the day. The later work of Möhler, Symbolik — and the influence of the Tübingen school in general — introduced, in an initial way, history to ecclesiology. More importantly, it offered Christology as a guiding principle. With the help of Schrader, Passaglia published in 1853-54 the two-volume De ecclesia Christi, organized around the theme of the body of Christ. Scheeben's influential 1865 Die Mysterien des Christentums organized all of Catholic theology around one central idea, that of the incarnation, which is the exterior movement of the Trinity, the base of the Church, the body of Christ, and is continued in faith and in the sacraments. Perrone drew the incarnational theology of the Tübingen school into the orbit of the Roman Curia, while Schrader's lectures at the Collegium Romanum on the mystical body anticipated the first draft of Vatican I's document on the Church.19

On January 21, 1870, the schema on the Church (Supremi pastoris) was presented to the participants at the First Vatican Council. The first chapter of this initial draft was titled 'The Church is the Mystical Body of Christ'. The chapter began:

The only-begotten Son of God ... appeared in the likeness of man, having assumed the form of our body so that earthly corporeal men, putting on the new man which is created in the image of God in

justice and holiness of truth (Eph. 4:24) should constitute the mystical body of which he himself is the Head.25

The opening paragraphs of this initial draft, reflecting the theological convictions of its authors Perrone and Schrader, received mixed reviews from the Council participants. Though never discussed by the body of bishops, several written responses criticized the notion of the mystical body as too vague, as pertaining to mystical theology and not dogmatic theology proper, and as unable to offer a sufficiently specific definition of the Church. Some suggested the terms kingdom of God or society as better starting points for a definition. These reservations led to a second draft (Tametsi Deus), prepared this time by the Jesuit Joseph Kleuten, that subordinated the theme of the mystical body to the language of Church as the ‘true society’ of the faithful. While discussion on the second draft never took place and no complete document De Ecclesia was promulgated by the Council, the shift from the first to the second draft reveals the force of the prevailing societas perfecta paradigm of Church. Despite the creative recovery of the mystical body theology begun by Möhler and fostered by theologians leading up to the Council, it would be sixty years before mystical body would emerge with real force.

A model takes shape

The Pauline image of the body of Christ had been present in the encyclicals of Leo XII and Leo XIII, but it began to appear in Catholic theology with growing frequency during the 1920s and 1930s.26 Surveying periodicals in Latin, French, and English, the American Jesuit Joseph Bluett observed that from 1920-25 the number of articles treating the mystical body equalled that of the previous twenty years. The output doubled in the following five years, and continued to grow, reaching a kind of climax (in terms of volume) around 1937.27


21. The encyclicals of Leo XIII suggest a growing appreciation of the Church as the mystical body of Christ—an image that nevertheless remains alongside the pope’s view of the Church as a ‘perfect society’. Compare his earlier Immortale Dei no. 8 with the later Satis Cognitum nos. 3-5, 10 and Divinum Illud Munus no. 5, in Claudia Carlen, ed., The Papal Encyclicals: 1878-1903 (New York: McGrath, 1981) 109, 389-91, 395-96, 412.

Already in 1922, Romano Guardini had declared that 'the Church is awakening in souls.' By this phrase, Guardini referred to the growing awareness that the Church is not first an external institution, transmitting life to its members as a viaduct transfers water. Rather, the Church is life; believers are incorporated into the Church and the Church lives in them. Guardini blamed an institutional view of the Church on the individualism of the modern world. He offered the image of the mystical body of Christ as a response to the search for community that pervaded Europe—particularly Germany—following the First World War. Guardini and the Tübingen theologian Karl Adam, whose 1924 Das Wesen des Katholizismus quickly became a best seller, introduced the theme of the mystical body to an international audience. Scriptural and patristic studies by scholars such as Gustave Bardy, Louis Bouyer, Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, and others, contributed to a broad recovery of early Christian ecclesiological themes, particularly the theme of the body of Christ. Meanwhile, the theological work of Guardini and Adams, Karl Feckes, Erich Przywara, L. Deimel, and Yves Congar promoted this new approach to ecclesiology between the two world wars.

Mystical body theology grew up in the twentieth century in contrast to the institutionalism of Counter-Reformation ecclesiology and the individualism of Enlightenment philosophy. It took shape as an affirmation of the Church's mystery dimension, its participation in grace and continuation of Christ's saving presence. This invisible reality—the mystical body of Christ—was affirmed, but how it was understood in relationship to the visible Church on earth was variously understood. Three influential interpretations appearing during the 1930s reveal a range of views. Sebastian Tromp's four volume Corpus Christi quod est ecclesia represented a traditional attempt to harmonize the ancient image of the mystical body with the institutional and juridical approach of the neo-Scholastic

24. In 1915 Max Scheler predicted that when the Great War came to an end, Germans would desire a stronger sense of themselves as a people (Volk) and that they would act on this desire by seeking guidance from Catholicism. Robert A. Krieg, Romano Guardini: A Precursor of Vatican II (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997) 47.
Tromp argued that the model of the mystical body could not be played off against the institutional model, for the early Church did not envision the mystical body as a purely spiritual association, but always insisted on the visible unity of the body which is the Church. At the other end of the spectrum, Karl Pelz's controversial 1939 book, *Der Christ als Christus*, took to an extreme an emphasis on the body's spiritual dimension. His view of the intimate relationship between Christ and his mystical body led Pelz to compare this unity to the hypostatic union. The lack of attention to the visible and juridical aspects of the Church and his close identification of Christ and the Christian led to fears of a false mysticism that would obscure the distinction between Creator and creation. Pelz's book was ultimately placed on the Index. Finally, the important contribution of Emile Mersch represented a middle position. In his historical studies and constructive theology, Mersch viewed Christ at work in the Church from within rather than as an efficient cause operating from outside, which was the common view among neo-Scholastics. Not denying the visible dimension of the Church, Mersch did distinguish between the visible society of the baptized under the direction of its legitimate shepherds and the mystical body which is the communion of those who live in the life of Christ.

In his 1943 encyclical, *Mystici Corporis Christi*, Pius XII endorsed this theological theme, claiming that there is no more noble or sublime description of the Church than 'the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ'. This encyclical, the most comprehensive papal statement on the Church prior to Vatican II, was a careful bringing together of previous teaching and new theological directions – a welcome, though modest, contribution. The Pope favoured Tromp's attempt to harmonize the previous societas perfecta paradigm of Church with the recovered theme of the mystical body. Thus the encyclical contained a strong reaffirmation of the visible and juridical nature of the Church; and given Pius XII's ecclesiological presuppositions, visible and juridical meant a Church hierarchically, and even monarchically, constituted. For Pius XII the invisible and the visible dimensions of Church are one and the same; the spiritual community of Christ's body is the institutional, hierarchically-ordered society. The result is that, in *Mystici Corporis*, the pliable image of the mystical body serves to justify prevailing patterns of authority and power. Recognizing a role for those who enjoy charismatic gifts, the encyclical reminded its readers that 'those who exercise sacred power in this Body are its first and

29. Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis Christi*, no. 13
30. Tromp is generally recognized as the primary author of *Mystici Corporis*.
chief members. The strong association between the Church's invisible head (Christ) and its visible head (the Pope) affirmed papal centralization. In Mystici Corporis, the prerogatives of the Bishop of Rome, Christ's 'Vicar on earth', who 'governs His Mystical Body in a visible and normal way', were asserted in no uncertain terms. Thus the model of mystical body itself, while offering a deeper theological ground to ecclesiology, had little influence on the existing understanding of the Church's concrete, historical existence.

Meanwhile, the encyclical's identification of the mystical body with the Roman Catholic Church left the status of other Christian traditions and the place of non-Catholics baptized in Christ unclear. In the well-known passage, Pius XII stated:

Actually only those are to be included as members of the Church who have been baptized and profess the true faith, and who have not been so unfortunate as to separate themselves from the unity of the Body, or been excluded by legitimate authority for grave faults committed. ... It follows that those who are divided in faith or government cannot be living in the unity of such a Body, nor can they be living the life of its one Divine Spirit.

The claim that membership in the mystical body of Christ requires membership in the Roman Catholic Church raised objections from many Catholic theologians. Scripture scholars pointed out that for Paul valid baptism incorporates the believer into the body of Christ. Canonists pointed out that the Code of Canon Law recognizes that baptism makes one a person in the Church, even though heresy or schism may forfeit certain rights of individuals or groups. Ecumenists observed that the encyclical did not adequately distinguish non-Catholic Christians from non-Christians. Pius XII's 1947 encyclical on the liturgy, Mediator Dei, addressed some of these concerns by teaching that through baptism Christians are made members of Christ's mystical body. But the theme of the mystical body continued to exist in Church teaching somewhat uncomfortably alongside a juridical and institutional approach.

The mixed reception of Mystici Corporis illustrates a growing sense of unease with the mystical body model itself. While conservative commentators, appealing to the neo-Scholastic clarity of the societas perfecta model, accused these mystical body theologies of presenting an image of the Church vague, diffuse, and hard to pin down, figures such as Erich Przywara, L. Deimel, and Manasses Dominikus Koster engaged in a more

31. Pius XII, Mystici Corporis Christi, no. 17.
32. Pius XII, Mystici Corporis Christi, no. 40.
33. Pius XII, Mystici Corporis Christi, no. 22.
34. See summary in Dulles, 'A Half Century of Ecclesiology', 423.
nuanced critique. This model alone seemed unable to clarify the relationship between the visible and the invisible in the Church; its emphasis on the mystery dimension seemed ill equipped to specify the Church as an historic subject. Mystici Corporis confirmed the suspicion that 'mystical body' could be invoked in support of whatever structural reality needed support. While the encyclical gave the juridical concept of the Church a deeper theological base, its emphasis on the papal office exceeded even the language of the First Vatican Council. These limitations called for new approaches and new models.

The rise of new models and perspectives

In the years after Mystici Corporis, enthusiasm for the theology of the mystical body began to fade. The question of membership had thrown doubt on the coherence of the encyclical; meanwhile, disillusionment grew with the model's appeal to an abstract community spirit – following the war, Germans were especially conscious of the dangers of an uncritical embrace of Volkgeist.56 While the post-war period was one of theological vitality, even before Pius XII's encyclical critical studies had begun to appear that questioned mystical body as the comprehensive model of Church. The very return to the sources that brought about the rise of Mystical Body theology contained a dynamism that evoked other images.57 Mannes Dominikus Koster's Ekklesiologie im Werden was seminal. In this 1940 book, Koster called the idea of the mystical body 'pre-theological', claiming the image was responsible for keeping ecclesiology in a pre-scientific, merely metaphorical state. He argued that the theology of the mystical body, as filtered through Augustine and present in much of German ecclesiology, tended to reduce the Church to an aggregate of individuals sanctified by grace. That is, in its preference for the mystical, ecclesiology was not attending to its proper subject, the Church as a corporate historical reality. Koster believed that a truly theological definition of the Church must begin with the idea of the people of God – an idea that he believed had a stronger foundation in scripture and liturgy.58

35. Przywara criticized the papal letter of 'a tendency to a certain vague romanticism, a tendency to conceive the Mystical Body simply as the domain of grace, an inclination to see the consequent aberration of imagining a permanent physical presence of Christ in each Christian', while still recognizing that the encyclical avoided the extremes of the Church as a mystical milieu or legal institution. Cited in Thomas F. O'Meara, Erich Przywara, S.J.: His Theology and His World (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002) 165. See Mannes Dominikus Koster, Ekklesiologie im Werden (Paderborn: Bornfassius-Drucker, 1940); L. Debmei, Leb Christ: Sinn und Grenzen einer Deutung des kirchlichen Lebens (Freiburg: Herder, 1940).

36. See Kevin McNamara, 'The Ecclesiological Movement in Germany in the Twentieth Century', The Irish Ecclesiastical Record 102 (1964) 345-58, at 352.


Throughout the later 1940s and the 1950s, the theology of the mystical body was overshadowed by a flood of studies on the Church as the people of God. Yves Congar lists a host of Protestant and Catholic theologians— including G. von Rad, Ernst Küsemann, Nils A. Dahl, Lucien Cerfau, A. Oepke, Frank Norris, and others—who explored the scriptural foundations of the concept. These studies on the people of God theme had the effect of affirming the continuity between the two Testaments and of placing the Church within the larger story of salvation history. Lucien Cerfau argued that Paul did not offer a fundamental definition of the Church as the body of Christ. Rather, Paul began with the Jewish view of Israel as the people of God and saw Christians as the new people, called the Church of God; body of Christ was used by Paul to stress both the unity in these churches and their mystical union with Christ. Eschatology made its way into ecclesiology through the biblical language of a pilgrim people. Already in 1938, Robert Grosche had argued that the image of the Church as the pilgrim people of God gave greater attention to the Church’s eschatological orientation. Anscvonier’s The People of God complemented his The Spirit and the Bride by drawing attention to the Church’s human and historical—and thus limited—existence. Following the Second World War, as the themes of salvation history, eschatology, and ecumenism received more attention, people of God entered a variety of ecclesiologies; in different ways, the German historian of doctrine Michael Schmaus and the canonist Klaus Mörsdorf came to focus their views of the Church on this concept.

Twenty years after Vatican II, Joseph Ratzinger summarized the gains associated with the recovery of ‘people of God’:

So, therefore, if we wish to sum up, by means of main points, the most prominent elements of the concept of the people of God that were important for the Council, it may be said that it was here that the historical character of the Church became clear, the unity of the history of God with his people, the internal unity of the people of God beyond the boundaries of sacramental states of life, the eschatological dynamic, that is, the provisional and fragmentary character of the Church always in need of renewal, and finally the ecumenical dynamic, namely, the various ways of being joined or

41. See Robert Grosche, Pilgernde Kirche (Freiburg: Herder, 1938).
related to the Church which are possible and real, even beyond the confines of the Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{44}

Few pre-conciliar accounts denied a place for the former mystical body theme; most Catholic theologians saw body of Christ and people of God as complementary images or models of the Church. While recognizing that ‘people of God’ emphasizes the Church’s continuity with Israel and its historical existence, Congar stressed that ‘body of Christ’ was necessary to bring out what was new in the New Covenant: a share in the life of Christ. ‘Under the new Dispensation, that of the promises realized through the incarnation of the Son and the gift of the Spirit (the “Promised One”), the People of God was given a status that can be expressed only in the categories and in the theology of the Body of Christ.’\textsuperscript{45} Congar goes on to note this complementary approach in the work of R. Schnackenburg, J. Backes, Joseph Ratzinger, C. Altermiessen, Louis Bouyer, and Georges Florovsky. The view that body of Christ and people of God are complementary held in balance an earlier emphasis on the mystery and eternal dimension of the Church with the new appreciation for the Church as a historic and changing subject. This was the view that guided the discussion at the Second Vatican Council.\textsuperscript{46}

The initial draft document on the Church prepared for the Second Vatican Council evoked a method and a paradigm that were fading. Highlighting the image of the Church as the mystical body of Christ, the document proceeded, much like Mystici Corporis, by subsuming this image under the juridical categories of the institutional model.\textsuperscript{47} As the Council participants left behind an exclusively neo-Scholastic and deductive approach and favoured language drawn from Scripture and liturgy, a plurality of images emerged. On the one hand, the pre-eminent place granted to the language of mystical body was gradually relativized alongside other biblical images – subsequent drafts of what would become Lumen Gentium considered these images together under an initial chapter on ‘The Church as Mystery’. On the other hand, the language of people of God rose in prominence to become arguably the most important way of describing the Church present in the document. Richard McBrien


47. For a view of successive drafts of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, arranged in synoptic charts, see Constitutionis Dogmaticae Lumen Gentium: Synopsis Historica, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Franca Magistretti (Bologna: Istituto per le Scienze Religiose, 1975).
observes: "The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) made the People-of-God image its dominant image of the Church, more prominent even than Body of Christ, meriting an entire chapter in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church." 48 The Council presented not a synthetic, systematic ecclesiology, but adopted a descriptive mode; thus, various images were invoked as required by different themes as they appeared in the documents. As a new model arose attentive to the Church’s concrete, historical existence, it served to complement the strengths of the former emphasis on the Church’s mystery dimension. People of God complemented mystical body in a vision of a Church responding to the signs of the times.

Communion ecclesiology

Like the image of the body of Christ, the language of ‘communion’ (κοινωνία) appears in the New Testament and was developed during the early centuries of the Church. Paul speaks of Christians called in faith to fellowship with God and with one another (Phlm 6). This fellowship includes communion with Christ (1 Cor 1:9), the Spirit (2 Cor 13:13), and the Father (1 Jn 1:3), and there exists communion among Christians in their sharing and service to those in need (Acts 2:42). The Eucharist is described as a communion in the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor 10:16-17). 49 After the New Testament, the writings of Irenaeus, Cyprian, John Chrysostom, Basil of Caesarea, and others speak of communion in the celebration of the Eucharist, in the ministry of the bishop, and in the mystery of the Trinity. Concrete practices in the early Church – such as the sharing of eucharistic bread among altar communities, the participation of neighbouring bishops at episcopal consecrations, regional synods, the circulation of letters, and so on – demonstrate the practice of communion among local churches. 50 Gradually, this mutual interchange among local churches gave way to the increased authority of the pre-eminent sees, especially Rome; theologies affirming spiritually-rooted Church union were replaced by legislation regulating juridical bonds. Like body of Christ, the themes of communion were replaced by the institutionalism of the Latin West. 51


The roots of a model

Communion ecclesiology, as a modern phenomenon, implies some configuration of these patristic themes of spiritual fellowship, unity symbolized in the eucharistic celebration, and attention to the interplay between the local and the universal in the Church. These themes reappeared in the nineteenth century, where Johann Adam Möhler again serves as a seminal figure for Roman Catholic theology. The incarnational ecclesiology of his Symbolik, the focus of the latter part of his short career, would have immediate influence in Germany and, via the Roman School, an indirect impact on the rise of mystical body theology. But Möhler’s early pneumatological ecclesiology, found in Die Einheit, was only rediscovered in the 1930s and 1940s by figures such as Joseph Geiselman, Heinrich Fries, Pierre Chaillet, Marie-Dominique Chenu, and especially Yves Congar. Möhler’s early synthesis of German Idealism and patristic sources offered a vision of the Church as an organic, spiritual community. His view of the Spirit infusing each believer and permeating the community itself, along with his patristic appreciation for episcopacy and catholicity, are early anticipations of the themes of twentieth-century communion ecclesiology.

Parallel to the creative theology of Möhler and the Roman Catholic Tübingen School, a theological revival was gaining momentum in Orthodox thought. The Russian Orthodox theologian Alexei Khomiakov (1804-60) was, like Möhler, shaped by the Idealism of Schelling and the theologies of the early Church. Khomiakov promoted, over-against what he saw as the negative individualism of Western Christianity, a vision of Church as a living communion of mutual love. This communitarian ideal of sobornost would inspire the Slavophile movement, promoted in the early twentieth century by Russian Orthodox émigrés working at the Institut Saint-Serge in Paris. The work of George Florovsky (1893-1979), Paul Evdokimov (1901-79), Vladimir Lossky (1903-58), and especially the eucharistic theology of Nicholas Afanasiev (1893-1966) fostered a revitalization of Orthodox theology that touched Roman Catholic ecclesiology.

52. Doyle, Communion Ecclesiology, 13.
drawing attention especially to a theology of the local church and to the centrality of the Eucharist in the community’s life and mission.\textsuperscript{56} The eucharistic ecclesiology of Afanasiev influenced the work of Congar, Henri de Lubac, John Meyendorff, Alexander Schmemann, Jean-Marie Tillard, and John Zizioulas.

These two nineteenth-century trajectories – the one German and Catholic, the other French and Orthodox – came together in the nouvelle théologie of the first half of the twentieth century. The Paris-based Unam Sanctam series marks these theological trails. Congar, who founded Unam Sanctam, wanted to launch it with a new French translation of Möhler’s Die Einheit. Speaking of his discovery of the Tübingen theologian, Congar later recalled: ‘As with other things, Père Chenu revealed Möhler to me. I found there a source, the source, which I needed. … So what Möhler did in the nineteenth century became for me an ideal which would inspire and lead me to my own theology in the twentieth century.’\textsuperscript{57} In his frequent contacts with Saint-Serge, the ecumenically-minded Congar served as a bridge with Orthodox thought as well. Alongside Möhler’s early masterpiece, Unam Sanctam published Congar’s major works on ecumenism, Church reform, and the laity, Albert Gratieux’s studies on Khomiakov and the Slavophile movement, a volume on nineteenth-century ecclesiology, and a multitude of historical studies.\textsuperscript{58} Patristic ecclesiological models made their way into Roman Catholic theology through the research of Congar, de Lubac, Bernard Botte, Jean Daniélou, Joseph Lécuyer, and Cyril Vogel – models mediated in part by the Tübingen school and Orthodox thought.

The twentieth-century recovery of an ecclesiology of communion is often linked to the early ecumenical studies of Hamer, Hertling, Congar, Le Guillou, and others.\textsuperscript{59} But the emergence of the themes today consid-

\textsuperscript{56} See Albert Gratieux, A. S. Khomiakov et le mouvement slavophile, Unam Sanctam 5 and 6 (Paris: Cerf, 1939).
\textsuperscript{57} Jean Puyo, Une vie pour la vérité: Jean Puyo interroge le Père Congar (Paris: Le Centurion, 1975) 48.
ered central to a communion ecclesiology extended beyond these important studies. In rediscovering fresh views on the Church existing prior to the Middle Ages, pre-conciliar theologians raised questions surrounding specific issues touching on the themes of communion: episcopal collegiality, the role of the papacy in relation to the local churches, ecumenism, liturgical reform, and the role of the laity. But unlike the images of mystical body, people of God, or sacrament, ‘communion’ was not widely promoted as a comprehensive and integrative model of the Church prior to the Second Vatican Council. This is true even at the Council itself, even though the term ‘communion’ itself appears throughout the documents. While the documents of Vatican II speak of the Church as a sacrament of unity, the body of Christ, a bride, flock, temple, and above all, the people of God, nowhere do the texts state that the Church itself is a communion.60

To speak of the ‘communion ecclesiology’ of the Second Vatican Council cannot be referring to the preponderance of explicit statements concerning communion or even to the obvious intentions of the documents’ drafters. Instead, the themes of communion can only be reconstructed from various passages in the Council texts that touch on different dimensions of ecclesiology and Church life. While the first paragraph of Lumen Gentium calls the Church a sign and instrument ‘of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race’, the document as a whole reflects the results of debate, compromise, and consensus on how communion is to take shape in relationships among real people and within Church structures.61 How is communion recognized among various Catholic rites, among Christians, with other religions, and with the world? How is communion expressed and experienced at the eucharistic celebration or within the local church that is the diocese? How do bishops around the world exercise their ministry in communion with each other and with the bishop of Rome? What is the role of the laity within the Church communion? In light of recent attempts (sketched below) to


employ communion as an interpretative lens for Vatican II, it is important to recognize the converse as equally important: that the documents of Vatican II provide the key for interpreting the notion of communion.

A model takes shape

'Communion ecclesiology', as a developed Church model, is a post-Vatican II phenomenon. Most early commentaries on Lumen Gentium considered 'people of God' to be the main idea of the Council's ecclesiology. The themes of communion treated by the Council at first appeared mainly in studies on particular topics (e.g. liturgy, laity, ecumenism, collegiality) and in concrete developments such as the revitalization of episcopal conferences and the plans for future synods. But by the early 1970s, 'communion' began to emerge as a heuristic tool for reading the Council documents. The commentary on Lumen Gentium by Gérard Phillips, the secretary of the Council's theological commission, drew attention to communion as an underlying theme, more implicit than explicit, and anticipated the detailed exegetical studies by Oskar Saier, Antonio Acerbi, Hans Rossi, and Gianfranco Ghirlanda. Acerbi's careful historical analysis of Lumen Gentium argued that the final text contains two ecclesiologies, juxtaposed but not fully integrated, revealing the shift during the Council debates from a static, juridical ecclesiology to an open and dynamic view of the Church as a communion.

Two broad approaches have taken shape since the Council, each suggesting itself as the authentic interpretation of Vatican II's vision of the Church as a communion: (1) an Aristotelian approach that begins with the concrete, historical manifestation of the Church at the local level and (2) a Platonic approach that grants primacy to the universal Church as an ideal, spiritual reality. The first emphasizes the pastoral/practical


64. The distinction is Walter Kasper's: 'The conflict is between theological opinions and underlying philosophical assumptions. One side [Ratzinger] proceeds by Plato's method; its starting point is the primacy of an idea that is a universal concept. The other side [Kasper] follows Aristotle's approach and sees the universal as existing in a concrete reality' (On
dimension of local churches existing in communion with one another, while the second highlights the one Church as a mystical communion in grace. We consider each of these tendencies in turn.

Kilian McDonald observes the first approach, a communion ecclesiology 'from below', bursting out in the life of local churches following the close of the Council. The rise of *comunidades eclesiales de base* in Brazil and elsewhere led to reflection on the Church as present in the relationships within and among small, sub-parish gatherings of Christians. The 1968 meeting of the Latin American bishops' conferences (CELAM) in Medellin spoke of communion within these base communities; while ten years later the bishops gathered in Puebla employed 'communion', alongside 'participation', as a central theme in their document on evangelization. Here 'communion' involves participation in the life of the Trinity, participation in the Church, and participation in the work of social justice for the poor. The questions emerging from Latin America began by asking how communion is present within and among local communities and local churches, and led to exploring how Church and political structures facilitate or frustrate this communion. Leonardo Boff, in a theology rooted in the experience of base communities, pushes to the limit this communion ecclesiology 'from below'.

In Europe and North America, the work of Congar in ecclesiology and ecumenism inspired a line of theologians attending to the local church, including Jean-Marie Tillard, Hervé-Marie Legrand, and Joseph Komonchak, among others. Tillard's work has been particularly fruitful. He promoted a communion ecclesiology centred in the eucharistic celebration of the local church and pursued the implications of such a view for a host of theological issues, such as catholicity and inculturation, ecumenism, apostolic succession, and episcopal collegiality. For Tillard, the Church is a communion of communions, a Church of churches. His view does not give priority to the local churches over the universal; rather the local and universal are simultaneous. Following Vatican II, Tillard claimed that each local church exists only in communion with the...

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universal Church and that the universal Church exists in and from the local churches. Tillard's theology attends to the historical, social, and cultural characteristics marking the local community – keeping his view of the universal Church from becoming an abstract Platonic ideal. Attention to the local Church incarnates the notion of communion by tying it to real communities. In the Trinitarian ecclesiologies of Bruno Forte, Medard Kehl, and Hermann Pottmeyer, or in the use of 'communion' within the ecclesiologies of Walter Kasper, Jean Rigal, Miguel Garijo-Guembe, and Ghislain LaFont, we see similar attention to the concrete pastoral situation, to the unfolding reality of the Church as historic subject.

The second broad approach to the Church as communion, the Platonic appeal to the universal and the ideal, began with the rise of the international Communio movement in the early 1970s. During the first meeting of the International Theological Commission in the fall of 1969, an informal summit occurred among theologians concerned about and generally disillusioned with events in the Church following the close of the Council. There a small group of ITC theologians, led by Hans Urs von Balthasar and including Joseph Ratzinger, Henri de Lubac, Louis Bouyer, J. Medina, and Marie-Joseph Le Guillou, discussed ways of addressing what they saw as undesirable developments following the Council: an overemphasis on structural reform, an excessive modernization and neglect of proper authority and tradition, a functional approach to truth, and a too sociological, democratic view of the Church. Here the idea for


a new journal – intended to balance the progressive series Concilium – and a new international movement was born. After contacts with the conservative Italian lay movement Communione e Liberazione, von Balthasar chose the name ‘Communio’ for the movement. In 1972, the first edition of Internationale katholische Zeitschrift: Communio appeared (in Italian as well as German editions); since then over a dozen editions in different languages have appeared across Europe and the Americas.

By adopting the language of ‘communio’, this movement has linked this patristic category with the ecclesiological and political commitments of its proponents. The ecclesiological writings of von Balthasar, Ratzinger, de Lubac, Jean Danielou, and, more recently, David Schindler strive to recover the mystery dimension of the Church, its divine ground and sacred space, against what they see as an accommodation of the Christian witness to modern secularization. Repeated calls for institutional reform, public dissent, the decline in traditional modes of religious life, the growth of liberation and political theologies are all signals that the Church is headed in the wrong direction. Avery Dulles notes the influence on this movement of the Platonism of the early Church, and sees in these authors a ‘kind of neo-Augustinianism in ecclesiology’. According to Dulles, proponents of this view

do not want to see the Church reduced to an instrument for the rebuilding of secular society. They see it as a divinely animated organism, the bride of Christ, and the virginal mother who begets children for eternal life. ... While approving of the accomplishments of Vatican II, they regard the postconciliar turmoil as the work of an alien spirit: They strongly resist all proposals to reform the structures of the Church according to contemporary management theory. The Church, in their view, is being excessively politicized. ... True reform, these theologians maintain, is interior and spiritual. It requires humility and obedience, respect for authority and tradition.

At times, this particular version of communion ecclesiology leads away from the Council in presenting communio-mystery and people of God in

competitive terms; it can also neglect the Church’s existence as a historic subject. 14 Ironically, by rejecting a too horizontal view of the Church and an overemphasis on the historicity of the pilgrim people of God, and by turning instead to the divine source and mystery of the Church, this approach has risked neglecting those aspects that gave communion shape in the Conciliar texts: collegiality, the importance of local churches, the role of the bishop in the eucharistic community, and the active participation of the laity.

The growing tension between the models of communion and people of God fostered by the Communio movement emerged forcefully at the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops. This synod, convoked to celebrate and reflect on the achievements of the Second Vatican Council, seems to have made a deliberate effort to downplay the Council’s use of the people of God model. While the pre-synodal reports submitted from around the world and several speeches at the synod itself spoke positively about the Council’s view of the Church as the people of God, the synod’s Final Report contains only passing reference to this image – remarkable for a document that warns against ‘a partial and selective reading of the Council’. 15 Instead the Final Report favoured the language of Church as mystery and communion; it is markedly suspicious of an approach to the Church too preoccupied with its concrete historical existence and institutional forms. ‘We cannot replace a false unilateral vision of the Church as purely hierarchical with a new sociological conception which is also unilateral.’ 16 The Church is a mystery. This emphasis reflected the concerns especially of some of the German bishops present, led by Cardinals Höfner, Meisner, and Ratzinger, who were in part reacting to the perceived bureaucratization of the German Church following Vatican II. 17 The initial report presented at the synod by Cardinal Danneels emphasized the way in which the concept of people of God had been misused ideologically, how it had been isolated from other notions of Church present at Vatican II, and how it had been used to foster false oppositions within the Church. The result of these emphases is the new claim made in the synod’s Final Report, that the ‘ecesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the Council’s documents’. 18

74. Ratzinger offers his reservations about the model of people of God in the first Chapter of Church, Ecumenism, and Politics.
The synod's appeal to the Church as communion can fail to recognize how the language of mystery and the dismissal of questions concerning institution and power work to the advantage of those holding institutional power. An ecclesiology of the ideal present in careful phrases about the Church's Trinitarian ground led away from the structural, institutional questions raised by many of the bishops before and at the synod – the teaching authority of episcopal conferences, the deliberative role of synods, and curial reform. When the Final Report considers the ways in which 'the ecclesiology of communion is also the foundation for order in the Church', its reflections on unity and pluriformity, Eastern-rite Churches, collegiality, episcopal conferences, participation in the Church, and ecumenism contain few concrete proposals.  

Joseph Komonchak concludes of the Final Report: 'invocations of “communion” and “collegial spirit” have triumphed over frank admission of serious problems of structure and relations in the Church today.'

These trends continue in the 1992 CDF letter, 'Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion' – a text that confirms the magisterial drift toward a Platonic, universal and idealized interpretation of communion. In an attempt to counter a perceived over-emphasis on the local Church in some versions of communion ecclesiology, the letter argues that the universal Church is 'a reality ontologically and temporally prior to every individual particular church'. This claim, which received significant criticism, seemed to imply the existence of an invisible, ideal Church that exists apart from any concrete, historical manifestations. A quasi-official qualification of this claim appeared a year later in l'Osservatore Romano, offering a helpful corrective. However, the CDF – following the ecclesiological perspective of its former prefect, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger – continues to affirm the priority of the universal Church over the particular; the question becomes how the 'universal

79. Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, 'The Final Report', 448-49. Walter Kasper, who served as synod secretary, was influential in promoting the language of communion as a mediating category. His personal theological view of Church as mystery and communion is nuanced and attentive to the concrete implications of communion for the Church's life and mission.
81. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 'Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion', Origins 22 (25 June 1992) 108-12, at 109. The congregation's preference for an ecclesiology of communion is evident in the document's opening line: 'The concept of communion (koinonia), which appears with a certain prominence in the texts of the Second Vatican Council, is very suitable for expressing the core of the mystery of the Church and can certainly be a key for the renewal of Catholic ecclesiology' (108).
82. The unsigned letter stated: 'Every particular Church is truly Church, although it is not the whole Church; at the same time, the universal Church is not distinct from the communion of particular Churches, without, however, being conceived as the sum of them.' 'La Chiesa come Comunione', L'Osservatore Romano, 23 June 1993, 1, 4; cited in Susan K. Wood, 'The Church as Communion', in The Gift of the Church, 159-76, at 174.
Church’ is understood. Yet throughout the discussion, there seems to be an unwillingness on the part of the CDF (and Ratzinger personally) to admit the concrete implications of a Platonic appeal to the universal. In a recent public debate with Walter Kasper, Ratzinger wondered why the letter’s mention of the priority of the universal Church has led people to think immediately of the Pope and the Curia, and of the problems of centralization. Such a link, he claims, ‘makes no sense’, for the 1992 letter ‘never dreamt of identifying the reality of the universal Church with the Pope and Curia’. The claims, Ratzinger asserts, are purely theological: ‘If one strips away all the false associations with Church politics from the concept of the universal Church and grasps it in its true theological (and hence quite concrete) content, then it becomes clear that the argument about Church politics misses the heart of the matter. Kasper’s reply suggests that the problem lies not in the concepts of communion or universal Church, but in the inability of a Platonic ecclesiological approach to deal with specific issues:

The question to Cardinal Ratzinger with which I should like to close is whether such reflections really have to remain as devoid of concrete consequences as his article might appear to claim. If one takes seriously the fact that in the Catholic view the Church is not some sort of Platonic republic, but a historically existing divine-human reality, then it cannot be wholly wrongheaded and be chalked off as mere political reductionism to ask about concrete actions, not in political, but in pastoral life.

Under John Paul II, communion emerged as the favoured paradigm for describing the Church. Following the 1985 synod, the claims that communion is the code to Vatican II and the key to the renewal of ecclesiology appear again and again: John Paul II confirmed the synod’s choice of communion in his apostolic exhortation to the laity, Christifideles Laici; communion shapes his view of the Church in his apostolic exhortations on the formation of priests and on the religious life, and communion appears as an underlying theme in the Catechism of the Catholic Church; John Paul II calls the Catechism ‘a sure norm for teaching the faith and thus a valid and legitimate instrument for ecclesial communion’.

84. Ibid. 11.
Paul II’s encyclical letter on ecumenism, Ut Unum Sint, is built on an ecclesiology of communion; and many of his public addresses invoke the theme. These documents, with the notable exception of Ut Unum Sint, have shown a decided preference for a universalizing interpretation of communion; a preference enhanced by the Platonic appeal to the Church as mystery. The shift of attention away from concrete particular churches has meant a shift away from their concrete questions and a certain unwillingness to admit the concrete implications of an appeal to communion. Like Pius XII’s use of mystical body theology, the language of communion has largely served to confirm the status quo; the appeal to mystery has excused ecclesiology of its responsibility for attending to the Church as historic subject.

The rise of new models and perspectives

Just as the mystical body theology appropriated by Pius XII was complemented and thus relativized by the language of people of God and by the plurality of images offered at Vatican II, so the Magisterium’s present appeal to an ecclesiology of communion will likely give way to new models, new approaches to and ways of describing the Church. Vatican II is a moment in history, offering not a single and eternal ecclesiology, but an openness to many ecclesiologies, an openness to development and change in the Church’s self-understanding. The plurality of the Council’s vision and the evidence of history suggest that communion will unlikely disappear, nor should it. But how will an ecclesiology of communion function in the future? Are there further models that might complement it? What, from our limited vantage point, might we anticipate about the next stage in ecclesiological development?


90. See, for example, the closing address to a Vatican symposium on the Council’s implementation: John Paul II, Vatican Council II: Prophetic Message for the Church’s Life’, Origins 29 (4 May 2000) 753-55, at 755.

It seems that the future of communion ecclesiology lies not with a deductive and abstract Platonic approach, but with versions that attend to the concrete historical existence of the Church. A Platonic approach to communion risks either presenting a nebulous and content-less ideal, spiritualized to the point of denying any tangible implications for the historical community or serving as a mystical shell to mask an ideological restoration of the societas perfecta model (accusations brought against the theology of the mystical body before Vatican II). Thus, some critics claim ‘communion’ is wholly inadequate for defining the historical mission of the Church. Others call communion ecclesiologies to account for their underlying assumptions about Church polity. Ghislain Lafont warns: ‘But it can especially awaken the fear that, once we have defined the Church as communion, we feel quite free to develop a juridical structure that is even more restrictive and burdensome than the idea of communion will bear.’

There have been constructive and creative communion ecclesiologies. The work of Kasper and Tillard illustrates the ways in which the themes of communion (present in some Vatican II texts) can advance the practical and pastoral, from ecumenical dialogue to inculturation to the role of bishops’ conferences. If it is concrete issues that push ecclesiology forward, then looking ahead to future models requires attentiveness to the pastoral questions facing the local churches today. Vatican II was successful because its view of the Church, grounded in scripture and tradition, responded to particular and pressing questions: ecumenism, the laity, collegiality and primacy, the relationship of Church and State, the liturgy, and so on. Forty years later, some of the big issues that still need to be addressed concern religious pluralism, the growing role of new ministries, structures for collegiality, inculturation, the Catholic identity and mission of important institutions, questions surrounding the structures of clericalism and power, to name just a few. Ecclesiology cannot take refuge in mystery or idealized forms. Communion, as an organizing principle for ecclesiology, will survive to the extent that it addresses these questions demanding a response. More than likely, this model will need to be complemented by others. I conclude with two models recommended by the issues listed above. These are suggestions more than predictions, two ideas borrowed from others about where ecclesiology might go next.

First, communion must be complemented by mission. Communion ecclesiology has fruitfully sought connections between Trinitarian theology and reflection on the Church — recalling that the Church is an ‘icon of the Trinity’. But the danger of over-identifying Church and the divine is ever present, and the analogy is problematic. Modelling Church

94. Lafont, Imagining the Catholic Church, 94.
communion on the Trinitarian communion-in-unity is difficult because the ‘divine unity is where God is most different from God’s creatures, even the creation that we call Church’.95 Neil Ormerod directs attention away from the immanent Trinity to the economic:

What is first in our knowledge of the triune nature are the divine missions of Word and Spirit, which in turn ground our knowledge of the processions and persons within the Trinity. In this way a mìssìo ecclesiology also makes contact with Trinitarian theology, not in terms of communio and perichoresis, but in terms of missio and processio. Communion may be our eschatological end in the vision of God, but in the here and now of a pilgrim Church mission captures our ongoing historical responsibility.96

A mission ecclesiology may be the future fruit of Lumen Gentium Chapter 1, in which the Church’s source and ground in the triune God is described not primarily in terms of inner-Trinitarian relations but in terms of salvation history. These introductory paragraphs challenge the solipsism of some communion ecclesiologies by recalling the Church's end and goal, the kingdom of God, and the Church's historical movement in grace toward that goal.97 Just as the people of God model injected eschatology into a static mystical body theology, so mìssìo could make room for those questions that admit development and change: social and economic disparity, inculturation, the status of local churches, religious pluralism and its relationship to the Church’s missionary activity.

Second, a baptismal ecclesiology may take shape to complement the themes of communion ecclesiology. Indeed, the links between Eucharist — so central to the development of an ecclesiology of communion — and baptism suggest integrating both into a thoroughly sacramental ecclesiology. The polyvalence of baptismal imagery, and its theology, evokes death, burial and resurrection, new birth, incorporation and initiation. Reflecting on the ecclesiological implications of baptism offers fresh perspectives on pressing issues receiving little attention in many treatments of the Church as a communion. Communion ecclesiology rightly emphasizes the ministry of the bishop and his eucharistic presidency. But what of the many new ministers and forms of ministry reshaping the Church today? The theology of baptism as a call and commissioning to active service in the community extends through and beyond liturgy to the many ministries in today’s parish; the diversity of baptismal charisms leaves

96. Ibid.
97. Lumen Gentium 5. See also Ad Gentes 2. In such a mìssìo ecclesiology, it is the final section of the 1985 synod’s Final Report, 'The Church’s Mission in the World', that will rise to balance in the Church’s self-understanding the report’s earlier sections on Church as mystery and communion.
behind a myopic focus on one minister (no matter how important that minister is). Like people of God, a baptismal ecclesiology has the advantage of clearly affirming the equality of everyone in the Church, for the basis of this equality lies in baptism. Could greater attention to a baptismal ecclesiology resist the too-easy appeal to the clergy-laity distinction and instead affirm a diversity within the Church based on real roles and concrete ministries? How would reflection on baptismal death and new birth illuminate discussion of the sinfulness of the Church and its perpetual need for reform? What if eucharistic fellowship, within the context of ecumenical dialogue, took as its primary referent common baptism? A baptismal ecclesiology does not solve these difficult questions; instead, these difficult questions suggest a baptismal ecclesiology as a helpful starting point for conversation. 98

Conclusion

These pages have given not a history of the Church but a history of recent reflection on the Church. To study the succession of Church models is not to argue for the inherent superiority of one over all others. It is simply the recognition that ideas have a history and the attempt to observe how ideas about the Church change. The parallels between the pre-conciliar mystical body ecclesiology and the post-conciliar ecclesiology of communion are interesting. They share patristic roots and represent the dual legacy of the nineteenth-century theologian Möhler. In their years of ascendency, both models enjoyed an internal theological diversity and saw one theological track appropriated and endorsed by the papal magisterium. Both begin to fade in the face of unanswered questions and issues left unaddressed by a static and abstract conception of the Church, an interpretation that fails to account for the Church’s existence as historic subject. Insofar as these models privilege mystery to the disregard of the community’s historical existence, they risk ignoring the very subject matter of ecclesiological inquiry: the concrete Church—understood as a divine-human reality, a mystery manifested in history. Speaking of these limitations, Giuseppe Colombo concludes, “To refer to the notion of “mystery”, demanded in any adequate ecclesiology, does not have the purpose of resolving the question of its subject, but precisely that of posing it.” 99 As questions are asked and honestly addressed, other models and approaches emerge that affirm the eschatological, the limited, and the local.