

*Engaging the  
Doctrine  
of*

# THE CHURCH

*Matthew Levering*

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Word on Fire Catholic Ministries  
PO Box 97330, Washington, DC 20090-7330  
or email [contact@wordonfire.org](mailto:contact@wordonfire.org).

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To Roger Nutt

# Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	i
1. Bride of Christ	43
2. Family of God	79
3. Body of Christ	123
4. People of God	161
5. Mother	237
6. Apostolic	285
7. Catholic	325
Conclusion	377
Bibliography	391
Index	453

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This book is dedicated to Roger Nutt, my friend for over twenty years and a master of Aquinas’s thought and Charles Journet’s ecclesiology. Roger is Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs at Ave Maria University, where I taught for nine years in the 2000s and where I had the privilege of being Roger’s colleague. His scholarly acumen is matched by his gift for leadership, but both are grounded in his deep faith. Roger has devoted his life to testifying in word and deed to the truth of Jesus’s saying, “I have come as light into the world, that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness” (John 12:46).

# Introduction

## I. SETTING THE SCENE

This book is the seventh in my “Engaging the Doctrine” quasi-dogmatics, after volumes on revelation, the Holy Spirit, creation, marriage, Israel, and Jesus Christ (and Mary). In taking up the doctrine of the Church, I am amazed by how beautiful the Church is and what a joy it is to be Catholic. Intra-Catholic controversies and ecumenical debates necessarily receive significant attention in this book. But the core of the book is not the controversies but the perennial truths about the Church in relation to Christ and the Spirit drawing us to the Father. If we anchor our gaze elsewhere, we lose touch with the sap of the Gospel, and everything becomes mere intramural squabbles about power. Had it not been for fear of misunderstanding, I would have subtitled the book “reflections upon a Church in eschatological crisis” because sharing in Christ’s tribulation (the path of the cross) is what the Church always is: the eschatological community or inaugurated messianic kingdom undergoing the crisis of the “labor pains” of the new creation (Rom 8:22), “bearing abuse for him [Christ]” and seeking the glory of the “city which is to come” (Heb 13:13–14), nourished by Christ’s “altar” and “by the blood of the eternal covenant” (Heb 13:10, 20), and guided by “the great shepherd of the sheep” who pours forth his Spirit (Heb 13:20).

What I love about the Church as Christ’s eschatological community are the realities of faith to which the New Testament everywhere testifies, and through which believers “encourage one another and build one another up” (1 Thess 5:11). In the chapters that follow, therefore, I will focus attention on the images of the Church that emphasize intimate communion with Christ and the Spirit—namely, the Church as the Bride of Christ, the Family of



God, the Body of Christ, the People of God, and our Mother, whose members rejoice in “put[ting] on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation” (1 Thess 5:8). I recognize, however, that as the Protestant theologian Stanley Hauerwas warns (echoing Paul, who urges “let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep [spiritually] awake and be sober” [1 Thess 5:6]), the Church faces a constant pull toward worldliness as part of awaiting the fullness of the “day of the Lord” (1 Thess 5:2). Hauerwas states, “Christians . . . are tempted to become invisible, justifying their identification with the surrounding culture in the name of serving their neighbor. One of the names given such invisibility is Constantinianism, a term that describes the strategy of Christians when they become an ally of Caesar.”<sup>1</sup>

Whatever one thinks of the historical Constantine or of proper church-state relations, there is no doubt that one of the temptations of the Church in every age is to become a Church drained of the vibrancy of divine revelation, sacramental mystery, and transformative holiness, and thereby to become a worldly and lifeless Church. This reductive path can even be taken in the name of renewing the Church, as happens in Tomáš Halík’s *The Afternoon of Christianity: The Courage to Change*.<sup>2</sup> The Reformed

1. Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Brazos, 2006), 62.

2. See Tomáš Halík, *The Afternoon of Christianity: The Courage to Change*, trans. Gerald Turner (University of Notre Dame Press, 2024). Halík dismisses alternatives to his plan of renewal through classical religious liberalism by arguing that the alternatives are mere “ideologies that declare a certain form of the Church and its knowledge (a certain state and form of theology) to be perfect, thus preventing the possibility of development and reform” (22); see also his rhetorical question, “How can we resist the temptation to turn the Church and religion into a ghetto, a locked and fortified bunker, a mausoleum of yesterday’s certitudes or a private garden for consumers of soothing and soporific drugs?” (30; cf. 61 for the denial that religiously liberal Christianity is itself “a mausoleum of yesterday’s certitudes”). As he goes on to say (misinterpreting the first Christians’ relation to Judaism), “Faith must be brought into a new space, as when Paul brought Christianity out of the confines of the Judaism of his day. . . . I believe that the Christianity of tomorrow will be above all a community of a new hermeneutic, a new reading, a new and deeper interpretation of the two sources of divine revelation, scripture and tradition, and especially of God’s utterance in the signs of the times” (58). In his view, all who question this “new hermeneutic” are “traditionalists,” and “traditionalism is either a temporary ‘infantile disorder’ of immature converts or a cover for psychologically unbalanced people who will create serious problems for Church structures” (63). He lumps Pope Saint John Paul II and Joseph Ratzinger / Pope Benedict XVI into this category. Halík calls for the ordination of women and “a completely new model of pastoral ministry,” “a new understanding of the priest’s

theologian Michael Allen rightly exhorts, “The dependence of the church upon God’s Word, spoken unto her from the outside, finds fruition in the stature of faith and the stance of trust. We attend to it. We are alert to it.”<sup>3</sup> But in fact, we all too readily allow “the cross of Christ [to] be emptied of its power” (1 Cor 1:17). A worldly Church attends more to what the world judges necessary than to what Jesus Christ accomplished for us and requires of us, as revealed by the prophets and apostles and as anchored in cruciform love. As the theologian José Arangüena says, “The Church can be said to have been born principally in the Cross.”<sup>4</sup> Or as Paul remarks when confronted by the cultured Corinthians and their slide into worldliness, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2).

The distorted image of a worldly Church devoted to power and prestige and far distant from the life of the cross appears throughout William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* in the late fourteenth century. In a representative scene from the poem, a vicar comments, “I never knew a cardinal who didn’t come from the pope / And when they come we clerics pick up the tab for their stay, / For their furs and feed for their palfreys and plundering followers. / . . . ‘The country is the more cursed that cardinals come into / And where they hang out lechery reigns longest.’”<sup>5</sup> Such a Church also meets us when Bernard of Clairvaux writes to Archbishop Henry of Sens in the mid-twelfth century. Bernard remarks that the faithful work of a bishop will be achieved “not by *recherché*

mission in the Church and in society,” “even greater scope for the involvement of the laity,” “the decentralization of the Church,” the end of priestly celibacy, recognition that Jesus did not institute a cultic or hierarchical priesthood, substitution of orthopraxy for orthodoxy, “the courage to experiment,” the welcoming of “a new reformation,” moral approval of committed sexual relationships between members of the same sex, and “the shift from Catholicism to catholicity” (63–70, 199, 207).

3. Michael Allen, *The Fear of the Lord: Essays on Theological Method* (T&T Clark, 2022), 46. I concur with Allen’s affirmation, “Jesus was, is, and shall be; therefore, his Word and the church’s witness to that Word can be trusted” (46).

4. José Ramón Pérez Arangüena, *La Iglesia: Iniciación a la Ecclesiología*, 4th ed. (Rialp, 2001), 29. All translations are my own unless otherwise credited.

5. William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The C Version*, trans. George Economou (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 207.

clothes, grand buildings and a parade of horseflesh, but by moral elegance, spiritual zeal, and good works. Yet how many act otherwise! One may observe in certain prelates a positive cult of clothing, but no, or next to no, cult of the virtues.”<sup>6</sup> Such a worldly Church appears more recently when Hans Küng, addressing the newly elected Pope Francis in 2013, urged him to “[carry] out the long-overdue, radical structural reforms and the urgently needed revision of the obsolete and unfounded theology behind the many problematical dogmatic and ethical positions that his predecessors have attempted to impose upon the Church.”<sup>7</sup> With unconscious irony, Küng places his hope in the power of Pope Francis to bring about the end of “the monarchical-absolutist papacy” and its domination of the Church.<sup>8</sup> Küng advocates doctrinal rupture that can

6. Bernard of Clairvaux, “On the Conduct and Office of Bishops,” in *On Baptism and the Office of Bishops*, trans. Pauline Matarasso (Cistercian, 2004), 37–82, at 42. See also Bernard of Clairvaux, *Five Books on Consideration: Advice to a Pope*, trans. John D. Anderson and Elizabeth T. Kennan (Cistercian, 1976).

7. Hans Küng, *Can We Save the Catholic Church?* (William Collins, 2013), xvii.

8. Küng, 6. For background, see Hans Küng, *Infallible? An Unresolved Enquiry*, new expanded edition, trans. Eric Mosbacher, Edward Quinn, and John Bowden (Continuum, 1994)—much of which was originally published in German in 1970. See also Hans Küng, *The Church—Maintained in Truth: A Theological Meditation*, trans. Edward Quinn (Seabury, 1980), where Küng defends an account of the “indefectibility” of the Church that allows for plentiful errors and reversals of prior definitive teaching, even while in every epoch God continues to renew the Church in truth. He argues, “The Church’s persistence in truth cannot be given expression in infallible propositions. A genuinely concrete form of persistence in truth must be conceived differently. It is not a question of the permanence of certain propositions, but again of the permanence of the Church itself in truth. . . . In the concrete, the Church is maintained in truth whenever *Jesus himself* and not some other secular, political, or clerical figure *remains the truth* for the individual or community”—and whenever this truth (Jesus) is “imitated and given living expression” in true discipleship (*The Church—Maintained in Truth*, 19–20). If so, however, it follows that “the Church’s persistence in truth” cannot itself be an infallible or definitive proposition. Küng contends, “In the Church there will always be a sufficient number of people who so live according to the gospel that the message can be perceived and that to speak of the ecclesial community remaining in the truth makes sense, a permanence in the truth which cannot be nullified by individual erroneous propositions even if these have an official character. . . . Even a possibly false dogma (and how many a dogma has been forgotten today or touches the Christian’s sense of faith marginally at best) cannot destroy the Church’s being and truth. The totality of faith consists in the integrity of commitment, not in completely correct propositions” (36). Küng assumes that “the gospel” is clear enough and so people will live by “Jesus himself” even when the Church’s definitive teachings include numerous false teachings about “the gospel.” He gives a fuller explanation in chapter 4 of *The Church—Maintained in Truth*, where he appeals to community and tradition, which he sharply distinguishes from “the ecclesiastical system” and which the theologian interprets “in a critically scientific spirit” (42). Again, he claims to employ “the gospel” or faith in Jesus as his measure for determining what is true in the Church’s dogma, but it is unclear how he is so sure about knowing what “the gospel”

only be a corruption of dogma, not a development of it, for the sake of refitting the Church to accord with the norms of our day.

Ecclesiastical worldliness deeply troubled Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI. In a 2011 address given to Church employees in his native country of Germany, Pope Benedict described Christ's Church as a participation in the eternal processions of the Son and Holy Spirit, a participation opened up for us "by virtue of the fact that Christ, the Son of God, as it were stepped outside the framework of his divinity, took flesh and became man, not merely to confirm the world in its worldliness and to be its companion, leaving it to carry on just as it is, but in order to change it."<sup>9</sup> He suggests that everything about the Church should be measured by Christ's mission. Ecclesial worldliness can be diagnosed whenever "the Church becomes self-satisfied, settles down in this world, becomes self-sufficient and adapts herself to the standards of the world."<sup>10</sup> One sign that this is happening is when the Church "gives greater weight to organization and institutionalization than to her vocation to openness towards God, her vocation to opening up the world towards the other."<sup>11</sup> A Church drawn toward

is. See also Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, trans. Edward Quinn (Doubleday, 1976), where he indicates that "the gospel" or "Jesus" is what present-day historical-critical scholarship can reveal with respect to Jesus's kingdom preaching. For a critique of Küng on this point, see Robert Barron, *The Priority of Christ: Toward a Postliberal Catholicism* (Brazos, 2007).

9. Pope Benedict XVI, "Address to Catholics Engaged in the Life of the Church and Society," September 25, 2011, vatican.va. See also Gerhard Ludwig Müller, "Das trinitarische Grundverständnis der Kirche in der Kirchenkonstitution 'Lumen Gentium,'" *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* 45, no. 4 (1994): 451–65.

10. Pope Benedict XVI, "Address to Catholics Engaged in the Life of the Church and Society." See also, for background, Santiago Madrigal, SJ's *Karl Rahner y Joseph Ratzinger: Tras las huellas del Concilio* (Sal Terrae, 2006), 167–68.

11. Pope Benedict XVI, "Address to Catholics Engaged in the Life of the Church and Society." See also Martin Onuoha's astute summary in his *Actio Divina: The Marian Mystery of the Church in the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI)* (Peter Lang, 2021), 60: "[Ratzinger/Benedict] fought tooth and nail against a view of the Church as a bureaucratic structure administering social welfare services and programs for political action." Onuoha's remark is quoted by Tracey Rowland, "Joseph Ratzinger on Democracy within the Church," *Communio* 50, no. 4 (2023): 635–56, at 636. Rowland aptly describes the view of the Church against which Ratzinger fought as "Catholic Inc." Instructively, Rowland goes on to contrast Ratzinger's (and Hans Maier's) *Demokratie in der Kirche: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen* (Lahn, 2000) with Karl Rahner, SJ's *Freiheit und Manipulation in Gesellschaft und Kirche* (Kösel, 1970), in which Rahner supports individual national churches (within the Catholic Church) being governed by a synodal structure comprised of bishops, priests, and laity. See also Oliver Putz, "I Did Not Change;

worldliness will focus not on opening up *the world* to God by proclaiming and sacramentally mediating the redemption won by Christ, but rather on securing its own life *in this world* by conforming its message to the tendencies of fallen humanity.<sup>12</sup>

A Constantinian Church, in short, attempts to serve the world on the world's terms as an instrument for this-worldly ends.<sup>13</sup> Not surprisingly, then, the Church's dogmatic and moral teaching becomes negotiable. In *Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility* (1983), Karl Rahner and Heinrich Fries proposed that the mainline Christian churches, including the Catholic Church, should band together under a new umbrella structure, allowing each church to keep its distinctive doctrines while embracing full intercommunion and recognition of one another's ministry, and with the pope as a figurehead no longer able to enunciate binding doctrine. The ultimate surviving doctrines in this new Church would be determined later.<sup>14</sup> Rahner's 1972 *The Shape of the*

They Did!': Joseph Ratzinger, Karl Rahner and the Second Vatican Council," *New Wineskins* 2, no. 1 (2007): 11–31.

12. See, for example, Eberhard Schockenhoff, "Der Glaubenssinn des Volkes Gottes als ethisches Erkenntniskriterium? Zur Nicht-Rezeption der kirchlichen Sexualmoral durch die Gläubigen," in *Der Spürsinn des Gottesvolkes: Eine Diskussion mit der Internationalen Theologischen Kommission*, ed. Thomas Söding (Herder, 2016), 305–30.

13. What I mean by "Constantinian" can also be expressed by the term "Erastian," even if the Church has not become directly controlled by the government. For John Henry Newman's critique of Erastianism, see chapter 1 of my *Newman on Doctrinal Corruption* (Word on Fire Academic, 2022).

14. See Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner, *Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility*, trans. Ruth C. L. Gritsch and Eric W. Gritsch (Paulist, 1985). For background, see Ulrich L. Lehner, "The Ecumenical Vision of Beda Mayr, OSB (1742–1794)," in *A Defense of the Catholic Religion: The Necessity, Existence, and Limits of an Infallible Church*, by Beda Mayr, OSB, trans. Ulrich L. Lehner (The Catholic University of America Press, 2023), 1–20, drawing upon Franz Xaver Bantle, *Unfehlbarkeit der Kirche in Aufklärung und Romantik: Eine dogmengeschichtliche Untersuchung für die Zeit der Wende vom 18. zum 19. Jahrhundert* (Herder, 1976). Discussing the sixth section of Mayr's *A Defense of the Catholic Religion*, Lehner notes that "it is in this section that he introduces the concept of *limited ecclesiastical infallibility*. For him, such a humbler understanding of infallibility could bring about a reunification with the Protestant churches. This, however, would come at a price. It meant that the Catholic Church not only had to become aware of the limits of infallible doctrinal decisions, but also acknowledge that many of the doctrines that divided Protestants and Catholics were *not directly revealed*, as the Church claimed. . . . This theory silently presupposed that there were doctrines that could be proven neither from Scripture nor tradition, and which had been erroneously transmitted as *truths of faith*" (Lehner, "The Ecumenical Vision of Beda Mayr," 12). Lehner rightly continues, "Mayr *reverses* what *indirect revelation* meant. For him it is no longer revealed by God, not even by conclusion, and thus not a necessary part of the faith. Indirectly revealed teachings are supererogatory to him. They are pious and useful, but

*Church to Come* denies that Catholics today should be expected to adhere to a shared orthodoxy; argues that “human nature” is so historically mutable that the moral norms of the past no longer hold because human nature (whatever it is) has evolved; leaves open the question of whether a lay person can consecrate the Eucharist; advocates for women priests within a sharply changed understanding of priesthood; and calls for democratic participation of laypeople in the Church’s deliberative bodies.<sup>15</sup>

With an eye to implementing such changes, a 1977 meeting of the international editorial board of *Concilium*, toward the end of Pope Paul VI’s life, produced a book ambitiously titled *Toward Vatican III: The Work That Needs to Be Done*.<sup>16</sup> Although they were much in the minority, some of the more keen-eyed contributors to this volume warned against the danger of ecclesiastical worldliness. David Burrell raised the fundamental question: “Has *aggiornamento* too easily played into our Constantinian tendencies?”<sup>17</sup> The answer was all too clearly yes.

not necessary for salvation. Likewise, he conflates *dogmata ecclesiae* and *doctrinae Catholicae* in order to make settled doctrine appear to be open to abandonment and reinterpretation. Had the Catholic Church followed it, it would have had to acknowledge that it taught errors for hundreds of years: namely, that certain truths were *dogmata fide divina credenda* [but were in fact false]. The Church would have appeared to have inflated God’s word and thus commit theological suicide” (16). Lehner observes that Mayr’s ideas echo those of the Catholic thinker François Véron in his *Méthodes de traiter des controverses de religion* (A. Taupinart, 1638) and his *Règle générale de la foy catholique, séparée de toutes autres doctrines inférieures en autorité* (A. Taupinart, 1645). Lehner also directs attention to Walter Kasper’s *Dogma unter dem Wort Gottes* (M. Grünewald, 1965).

15. See Karl Rahner, SJ, *The Shape of the Church to Come*, trans. Edward Quinn (Seabury, 1974), which was written to inform the German Synod of Würzburg (1971–75). For background about that synod and for the argument that the Würzburg Synod is today continuing (this time not only in Germany but also in the worldwide Church), see Stephan Knops, “Die Würzburger Synode: Krisenindiz—Zeitdiagnose—Zukunftsplan,” in *Synodalität in der katholischen Kirche: Die Studie der Internationalen Theologischen Kommission im Diskurs*, ed. Markus Graulich and Johanna Rahner (Herder, 2020), 136–52. For a brief discussion of Rahner’s book in the context of the Würzburg Synod and of efforts to give the laity a greater voice, see (in the same volume) Johanna Rahner, “Klerus und Laien: Genese und Transformation eines typisch katholischen Paradigmas,” 170–95, at 190–91. María García-Nieto Barón points out that Pope Francis “is working to open up processes that allow for the presence of women inside the government of the Church,” without accepting that the sacrament of holy orders is open to women. Barón, *La presencia de la mujer en el gobierno de la Iglesia: Perspectiva jurídica* (EUNSA, 2023), 77.

16. See *Toward Vatican III: The Work That Needs to Be Done*, ed. David Tracy with Hans Küng and Johann B. Metz (Seabury, 1978).

17. David B. Burrell, CSC, “The Church and Individual Life,” in *Toward Vatican III*, 124–33, at 133. Burrell’s solution—exploring Catholic forms of “sectarian” communities—is unsatisfying but understandable.

## II. THE CHURCH AND ACCOMMODATION TO THE WORLD

Over the centuries, Catholic reflection on the Church has often proceeded in relation to this Constantinian temptation, either giving in to it or resisting it by means of a renewed attention to the mysteries of faith that preserve the Church in vitality and joy.<sup>18</sup> Ratzinger comments, “The Roman state was false and anti-Christian precisely because it wanted to be the totality of human capacity and hope. . . . But when Christian faith, faith in man’s greater hope, decays and falls away, then the myth of the divine state rises up once again.”<sup>19</sup> Often this happens unconsciously. To cite a recent example, John McGreevy’s *Catholicism: A Global History from the French Revolution to Pope Francis* contains the following final sentence, expressing his hopes for Catholicism: “Let’s hope that these young Catholics will be better positioned, in the words of [Pope] Francis, to be ‘citizens of our respective nations and of the entire world, builders of a new social bond.’”<sup>20</sup> For McGreevy, there is nothing controversial in this claim: in his view, the Church’s history and core meaning revolve around its contributions to local and global citizenship, as this citizenship is understood today by secular governments that consider themselves to be avatars of the arc of history.

Claiming the mantle of Pope Francis, McGreevy makes clear that his dream is for a new Catholicism focused on building up global civilization (the kingdom of God) while discarding outdated doctrines.<sup>21</sup> A similar note is sounded by the theologian

18. See Gonzalo Barbed Martín, *Una anciana muy joven: Historia de la Iglesia* (Ediciones Palabra, 2022), 10.

19. Joseph Ratzinger, “Biblical Aspects of the Question of Faith and Politics,” in *Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology*, trans. Robert Nowell (Crossroad, 1988), 147–52, at 148.

20. John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism: A Global History from the French Revolution to Pope Francis* (Norton, 2022), 422.

21. See also Robert Blair Kaiser, *Inside the Jesuits: How Pope Francis Is Changing the Church and the World* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), filled with observations such as the following: “Before the council, we’d thought we were miserable sinners when, really, we were being noth-

Massimo Faggioli. His *Joe Biden and Catholicism in the United States*, published to coincide with Biden's inauguration in 2020, functions as a laudation to America's second Catholic president, who is portrayed as leading the way toward a renewed Catholicism that fits both with American ideals and with the vision of Pope Francis. Faggioli places the Constantinian onus on the Republican Party and neo-conservatism, which he deems to be the archenemy of Catholic and American progress. The Democratic Party is here the bearer of Catholicism's future insofar as it is assisting the Church in updating itself and discarding outmoded ways and doctrines while remaining recognizably Catholic.<sup>22</sup>

Faggioli's book on Biden recalls Eusebius of Caesarea's celebratory tome on Constantine, in which, having lived through a period of intense persecution of Catholics by the Roman Empire, Eusebius rejoices that the Church no longer needs to be countercultural because it now aligns with the governing regime. As Eusebius says, "They danced and sang in city and country alike, giving honour first of all to God our Sovereign Lord, as they had been instructed, and then to the pious emperor with his sons, so dear to God. Old troubles were forgotten, and all irreligion passed into oblivion. . . . Thus all tyranny had been

ing but human. After the council, we had a new view of ourselves. We learned to put a greater importance on finding and following Jesus as 'the way' (as opposed to what we said in the Creed, simply giving voice to a set of doctrines we may or may not have understood). What mattered was what we *did*: helping to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and find shelter for the homeless. That's what made us followers of Jesus. . . . Before the council, we identified *salvation* as 'getting to heaven.' After the council, we knew we had a duty to bring justice and peace to the world in our own contemporary society" (80–81).

22. See Massimo Faggioli, *Joe Biden and Catholicism in the United States* (Bayard, 2021). See also, more recently, Faggioli's suggestion that Robert Barron's evangelizing efforts (in the quest for a "new ressourcement") are Trumpist. Faggioli published this viewpoint in his online article "Will Trumpism Spare Catholicism? Emerging Alignments Are Cause for Concern," *Commonweal*, April 22, 2024, but when Word on Fire protested the connection with Donald Trump, *Commonweal* first adjusted the passage and then removed it from the article, whose current version can be found at <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/will-trumpism-spare-catholicism>. I should add that Faggioli's more recent writings have sounded a somewhat less positive note with respect to the Biden presidency, as he (Faggioli) seeks to reset the boundaries of "centrism" in American Catholicism, with Barron supposedly in the "right wing."



purged away.”<sup>23</sup> If by Constantinianism one means that the state generally supports Catholic moral principles and, in certain ways, assists the Church in carrying out the prophetic and sacramental mission Christ gave to his apostles, then this is surely good. In practice, however, Constantinianism entails more than this, as the near-disastrous ecclesiastical meddling of the fourth-century descendants of Constantine already showed. For Constantinians across the centuries, appeal to the Holy Spirit has the role of seconding the arc of history sanctioned by the state while instrumentalizing the doctrine of Christ—the very doctrine sanctioned, in point of fact, by the (real) Holy Spirit in and through Scripture and Tradition.<sup>24</sup>

Consider the experiences of the fourteenth-century Doctor of the Church, Catherine of Siena.<sup>25</sup> Influenced as a young girl in Siena by the Dominican church and cloister of San Domenico, Catherine lived during a time when some Italian cities formed an anti-papal league to fight the army of the Papal States. Intent on averting such war, she came out in favor of a crusade against the Muslims in the Holy Land in 1375, seven years after making her “mystical espousal” to Christ (she remained living in her parental home). In 1376, she worked to help the city of Florence gain release from the interdict that Pope Gregory XI had placed on the city. To do this, she had to travel to Avignon, because the popes had been living for decades in the luxury of Avignon, fully under the sway of the French court. She helped to convince Pope Gregory XI to move back to Rome, but not long after her death, the

23. Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, trans. G. A. Williamson, rev. and ed. Andrew Louth (Penguin, 1989), 332–33.

24. On the work of the Holy Spirit, consider Archbishop Anthony Fisher, OP’s remark about Pope Francis’s understanding of synodality: “Unlike politicized, bureaucratic, or corporate conceptions of the church, Pope Francis insists that the Holy Spirit is the great protagonist in the church’s life. Without the Spirit, the pope says, we can hold an ecclesial UN meeting or diocesan parliament . . . but it will not be a true synod.” Fisher, *Unity in Christ: Bishops, Synodality, and Communion* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2023), 51. The key is how one conceives of the continuity of the work of the “Spirit of truth” (John 14:17).

25. For background to Catherine’s teachings and life, see Paul Murray, OP, *Saint Catherine of Siena: Mystic of Fire, Preacher of Freedom*, 2nd ed. (Word on Fire, 2020).

Church endured the Great Schism in which three popes, allied with different powerful rulers, vied for recognition.

Moving back in time closer to Constantine, Maximus the Confessor in the seventh century had his tongue and right hand cut off for stubbornly rejecting Monothelite and Monenergist understandings of Jesus Christ.<sup>26</sup> The Byzantine emperor Heraclius, crowned in 610, sought to foster the unity of his empire, which had been weakened by a lengthy war with the Persians, Avars, and Slavs and by the Monophysites' rejection of the Council of Chalcedon. Various efforts in the late fifth and sixth centuries had been made to achieve ecclesiastical reunion, but the hoped-for reunion had proven elusive. Emperor Justinian in the sixth century launched a campaign of persecution against the Monophysites, but this persecution had the result of rendering them even firmer in their beliefs.<sup>27</sup> Around 630, Emperor Heraclius and Patriarch Sergius of Constantinople developed a compromise: they affirmed that, although Christ had two natures, Christ had a single "energy." This compromise seemed to be working until a monk named Sophronius, soon to be elected Patriarch of Jerusalem, declared Monenergism to be heretical.

In this situation, Patriarch Sergius drafted an imperial edict, signed by Emperor Heraclius in 638, that was intended to resolve the divisions once and for all. This imperial edict affirmed Monothelitism. Its purpose was to assist the emperor in unifying the empire, a task that had become even more urgent due to the rise of Islam and its conquering armies. In 653, Pope Martin I, who had supported Maximus by convening a council against Monothelitism and Monenergism, was arrested and condemned by the emperor. Given the fraught political situation, his successors did not dare to speak out. Maximus, however, remained resistant. He

26. For the spiritual significance of Maximus's doctrine, see Luke Steven, *Imitation, Knowledge, and the Task of Christology in Maximus the Confessor* (Cascade, 2020).

27. For severe ecclesiastical corruption under Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora, see the work by their contemporary Procopius, *The Secret History*, trans. G.A. Williamson and Peter Sarris (Penguin, 2007).

denied that the emperor had any right to define dogma, as Emperor Heraclius's imperial edict had tried to do. As a result, Maximus was first exiled, and then, when he still would not recant, was tortured and endured the trial in Constantinople that led to his mutilation and death.<sup>28</sup>

Constantinianism reduces the Church to being above all an ally of those who exercise temporal power. The Gospel of John provides some sharp warnings in this regard. Jesus instructs his disciples, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. . . . Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also" (John 15:18–20). Although Peter in the Gospel of Matthew tries to convince Jesus that he (Jesus) will not be crucified, Jesus insists upon his cruciform path (see Matt 16:24–25).

When the Church accommodates itself to the world—generally by arguing that necessity and common sense require abandoning some of the Gospel's 'saltiness' (see Matt 5:13), as distinct from reforms that make Jesus's words and deeds more present—the Church wounds itself. A portrait of just such accommodation to the world comes from the pen of the religiously liberal Catholic biblical scholar Alfred Loisy. According to Loisy, over

28. For background, see Paul M. Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World* (Oxford University Press, 2016); and see also, for the role allotted to the emperor in the Byzantine Church, Francis Dvornik, *Byzantium and the Roman Primacy*, trans. Edwin A. Quain, SJ (Fordham University Press, 1966). On the one hand, Dvornik warns against trying "to reconstitute an ecclesiological system which we suppose to have existed in the Byzantine Church. We must understand that Byzantine theologians [like their Western contemporaries in the first millennium] never did develop an ecclesiological system in the modern sense" (16). On the other hand, he makes clear that "in Byzantium, the problem of the Roman Primacy was intimately connected with that of the imperial power": "Christian Hellenism . . . saw in the Emperor a representative of God upon earth, almost the viceregent of Christ. According to this political conception, the Christian Emperor not only had the right but also the duty to watch over the Church, to defend the Orthodox faith, and to lead his subjects to God. . . . While in the Byzantine Church, the Emperor continued to be the lawmaker, using the right which Christian Hellenism had granted to him, in the West it was the Sovereign Pontiff who, increasingly, became the sole lawgiver in the Church" (18–20). Dvornik adds, "To explain these differences, the theologian might be tempted to seek for reasons in the order of ecclesiology, but in that path, the historian will be reluctant to follow him" (19).

the centuries the Church has always done whatever needed at the time to spread the original impulse of eschatological hope and charity, rooted in Jesus's mistaken belief that the kingdom of God was imminent.<sup>29</sup> On this view, the measure of doctrinal development is vitality (or life): Do the doctrines still function successfully to spread the original impulse of hope and charity? If not, then the doctrines must change, as (Loisy thinks) they have done frequently in the past. He argues that in the original Jewish context, the disciples preached Jesus as the Messiah of the one God, whereas in the Hellenistic context, believers preached Jesus as the divine Logos or Word.<sup>30</sup> Loisy approves of such falsification, and he advocates squaring Christianity with the modern world by whatever means necessary. Similarly, Loisy's fellow early twentieth-century modernist George Tyrrell mocked Pope Pius X and all others who embrace "a body of divinely guaranteed terms and definitions and statements, final and valid for all ages and nations."<sup>31</sup> Tyrrell rejects such a notion of dogma, and he affirms

29. See Alfred Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*, trans. Christopher Home (Isbister, 1903), 177–78. For background, see Tomáš Petráček, *The Bible and the Crisis of Modernism: Catholic Criticism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. David Livingstone and Addison Hart (University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), 29–34, 203–13; Emil Goichet, *Alfred Loisy et ses amis* (Cerf, 2002); Jeffrey L. Morrow, *Alfred Loisy and Modern Biblical Studies* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2018); and the essays in *Catholic Modernism: Tyrrell, Loisy, and the Ongoing Challenge to Dogmatic Christianity*, ed. Matthew Levering and Jeffrey L. Morrow (Emmaus Academic, forthcoming). While sympathetic to Loisy, Petráček observes that "from 1875 to 1908 [Loisy] suffered a crisis of faith in the traditional understanding of the church" and "he had for some time before [his excommunication in 1908] questioned the divinity of Jesus Christ" (*The Bible and the Crisis of Modernism*, 211). Petráček underplays the real radicalism of Loisy when he (Petráček) writes that for *The Gospel and the Church* (just as for religiously liberal Catholics today), "the permanent communion of the church . . . requires a balance of tradition—by which the body of doctrine is preserved—and the unending work of human reason to adapt the formulations of old dogmas to reflect current scientific and philosophical realities. Dogmas and other formulations are imperfect; they cannot provide complete expressions of absolute truth; yet they are the least imperfect expressions of absolute truth available to humanity. But they too must serve the faith, not dictate it. Dogma is not poured out of the sky by God; it is formed along the historical continuum of theological inquiry. Divine in origin and content, dogma is nonetheless human in structure and composition" (33). The question is what is required for "tradition" to preserve "the body of doctrine," granted that dogmas, while not perfect, are "divine" in "content."

30. See Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*, 195.

31. George Tyrrell, *Medievalism: A Reply to Cardinal Mercier* (Longmans, Green, 1908), 123. Tyrrell observes somewhat earlier, "It is the historical and not the philosophical difficulty that inspires the reconstructive effort of the Modernist pure and simple. It is the irresistible facts concerning the origin and composition of the Old and New Testaments; concerning the

that radical accommodation to the world is necessary for the ongoing life of the Church. As Tyrrell says, a modernist's "faith in the world is more fundamental than his faith in the Church," because the world is God's creation, and God guides its progress, ensuring that the Church will adapt with it.<sup>32</sup>

By contrast, the Catholic Church's true reality displays what John Henry Newman calls the dogmatic principle. The Church is the bearer of ontological truth about divine and historical realities. God really is the Trinity, and the incarnate Son really was and is the Messiah. With regard to doctrinal development, the dogmatic

origin of the Christian Church, of its hierarchy, its institutions, its dogmas; concerning the gradual development of the Papacy; concerning the history of religion in general—that create a difficulty against which the synthesis of scholastic theology must be and is already shattered to pieces" (108).

32. Tyrrell, 147. For Tyrrell's understanding of revelation and dogma (and his view that dogma has a symbolic and practical value but not an enduring truth-value), see also Tyrrell, "Semper Eadem II" and "'Theologism'—a Reply," in his *Through Scylla and Charybdis: Or, the Old Theology and the New* (Longmans, Green, 1907), 133–54 and 308–54. For an early and insightful critique of Tyrrell's position (using writings published prior to the above-named texts), see Eugène Franon, "The Religious Philosophy of Fr. Tyrrell" (originally published in French in 1906), in *Defending the Faith: An Anti-Modernist Anthology*, ed. and trans. William H. Marshner (The Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 197–210, at 201. See also, for a postconciliar adaptation of Tyrrell's perspective (without citing Tyrrell), Edward Schillebeeckx, OP's *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden (Crossroad, 1990). Schillebeeckx deems Jesus to be (or to have been experienced as) the pinnacle of "revelation," whose content is fundamentally inexpressible: see *Church*, 26–27. He remarks, "Of no single period in the tradition of faith, not even that of the Bible, may the cultural forms and historical context be absolutized. But this certainly does not mean that these historical and socio-cultural mediations are worthless for faith or to be neglected. On the contrary, they have a very positive function, for all their relativity, since they are the only possible vehicles for the meaning of the offer of revelation to which the answer is given in faith, precisely because the gospel, which is not bound to one culture, can nevertheless be seen and found in the special features of particular, culturally limited structures of understanding" (37). He goes on to claim that "the offer of revelation is not an empty cipher: it has meaningful content, though this can never be grasped or objectified" (38); and he sides with Tyrrell, though in denser language, when he states, "Therefore the question of Christian identity through the changing centuries can be answered only by a comparison of differing cultural forms of the Christian experience of faith, interpretation of faith, and praxis of faith, as an answer to God's offer of revelation in Jesus. The only difference between the past Christian tradition and the new Christian traditions that we shall have to hand down and make lies in the fact that we can make comparisons with the past after the event. . . . The identity in the meaning of the gospel cannot primarily lie at the level of the Bible and the past tradition of faith, at least as such, and therefore cannot be found in a material repetition of that past. . . . The identity of meaning can only be found in the fluctuating 'middle field,' in a swinging to and fro between tradition and situation, and thus at the level of the corresponding relationship between the original message (tradition, which also includes the situation of the time) and the situation, then and now, which is different each time. The fundamental identity of meaning between the successive periods of Christian understanding of the offer of revelation is not to be found in corresponding terms . . . but on corresponding relationships between all the terms involved" (39, 41; see 43 and 224–25 for the consequences for dogma).

principle entails that theologians, using the tools of logic, can reasonably defend a dogma's "continuity of principles and logical sequence" vis-à-vis prior teaching, so as to show that there has been no rupture or corruption in the handing on of the saving truth of divine revelation.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, logical continuity is not by any means all there is. As Guy Mansini says, "The Church as a whole is mysterious in her being and agency. She possesses, as it were, a personality, sometimes figured as Christic (the Body of Christ), sometimes as Marian (the Bride of the Lamb), sometimes as Pneumatic (the Temple of the Holy Spirit)."<sup>34</sup>

As should be expected from these three images of the Church (Body, Bride, Temple of the Spirit), the power of grace can be seen in the Church's members. Of course, if one looks only for sins, there are plenty of sins to be found. Robert Jenson comments, "Description of the virtues definitive of the church's life may well have a sour ring in many ears; the life of the church manifests them all too incompletely."<sup>35</sup> Erasmus of Rotterdam aptly portrays early sixteenth-century Christendom as devoted to the folly of worldliness in his *The Praise of Folly*, whose purported author is "Folly."

Nevertheless, if one looks upon the Church with the eyes of faith, one perceives extraordinary grace. Erasmus has his narrator, Folly, say the following (the opposite of Erasmus's own view): "No fools seem more senseless than those people who have been completely taken up, once and for all, with a burning devotion to Christian piety: they throw away their possessions, ignore

33. Guy Mansini, OSB, *The Development of Dogma: A Systematic Account* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2023), 109, citing John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 6th ed. (University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 169. The dogma's "power of assimilation" or "conservative action on past adumbrations of the dogma" (Mansini, 110) is also capable of logical defense. In the same vein, see Reinhard Hüter, "Progress, Not Alteration of the Faith: Beyond Antiquarianism and Presentism: John Henry Newman, Vincent of Lérins, and the Criterion of Identity of the Development of Doctrine," *Nova et Vetera* 19, no. 2 (2021): 333–91.

34. Mansini, *Development of Dogma*, 108.

35. Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *The Works of God* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 210.

injuries, allow themselves to be deceived, make no distinction between friend and foe, . . . find satisfaction in fasts, vigils, tears, and labors.”<sup>36</sup> Such Christians exist; they are the heart of Catholic parishes, religious communities, schools, and hospitals.

Thus, for example, a profound sense of divine mercy—and therefore a profound mercy toward others—characterizes Catherine of Siena’s outlook. In her book *The Dialogue*, which is framed as God’s instruction to her about the mysteries that most trouble her, God tells her about Jesus: “The fiery chariot of my only-begotten Son came bringing the fire of my charity to your humanity with such overflowing mercy that the penalty for sins people commit was taken away.”<sup>37</sup> She imagines Christ as a Bridge; he bridges earth and heaven in a manner that infinitely exceeds what any mere creature could accomplish. We cross this Bridge when we are united to him by faith and Baptism; we are empowered to walk along the Bridge by charity and all the virtues (especially humility); we are strengthened on the Bridge by the Eucharist and holy obedience. God tells Catherine that the “lack of charity for me and for your neighbors is the source of all evils,” and God continues by bemoaning the cruelty of worldly “greed, which not only refuses to share what is one’s own but takes what belongs to others, robbing the poor, playing the overlord, cheating, defrauding, putting up one’s neighbors’ goods—and often their very persons—for ransom.”<sup>38</sup>

Catherine describes worldly logic, straining for control rather than embracing divine revelation, as “selfish love.”<sup>39</sup> A person in thrall to selfish love cannot love and cannot sacrifice for anyone else’s good. Nor can such a person love God. The logic of the world cannot go beyond worldly goods to an “infinitely desirous

36. Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, trans. Clarence H. Miller (Yale University Press, 1979), 132.

37. Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke, OP (Paulist, 1980), 112. She means the everlasting penalty.

38. Catherine of Siena, 35.

39. Catherine of Siena, 35.

love,” seeking God (Love) above all else, and thereby truly being able to love one’s self and neighbor.<sup>40</sup>

Catherine does not adopt false mercy in the sense of pretending that sin is not sin or in the sense of pretending that the world is not deeply ill due to pride and vice, but instead she exhibits real mercy by expressing at every step the greatest love for sinners. She combines this with a deep humility, well aware that she, too, has “sinned so much” and has been “the cause and instrument of every evil.”<sup>41</sup> She knows how much she relies upon the mercy and infinite goodness of “divine eternal Love” personally loving her, a sinner.<sup>42</sup>

Equally importantly, in the midst of the pastoral and doctrinal chaos of her day, Catherine shows respect for the Church and its hierarchical priesthood as part of her love of Christ and God. In *The Dialogue*, Catherine has God say the following about those who attack the Church “under the pretext of correcting the faults of my ministers”: “O dearest daughter, grieve without measure at the sight of such wretched blindness in those who, like you, have been washed in the blood, have nursed and been nourished with this blood at the breast of holy Church!”<sup>43</sup> Catherine highlights the transformative power of the sacraments, which mediate the power of Christ’s cross to believers. Catherine also points to the holy priests and bishops who have, over the centuries, “[given] off within the mystic body of holy Church the brightness of supernatural learning, the color of a holy and honorable life in following the teaching of my Truth, and the warmth of blazing charity.”<sup>44</sup>

Her confessor Raymond of Capua’s *Life of St. Catherine of Siena* contains numerous stories about how Catherine lived her faith. Reading this contemporaneous biography of Catherine,

40. Catherine of Siena, 42.

41. Catherine of Siena, 49.

42. Catherine of Siena, 49.

43. Catherine of Siena, 220.

44. Catherine of Siena, 222.



one sees that although there was much corruption in the Church, there were also many great souls who were being nourished by the Church's teaching and sacraments. Raymond describes Catherine giving alms to the poor and caring for the sick as though caring for Christ himself. Raymond also tells about a woman, a member of the Sisters of Penance of St. Dominic, who became bitterly envious of Catherine, an envy that developed into hatred and detraction. In response, Catherine tried "to placate her with acts of humility and kindness," as well as by praying for her and visiting her, including when the woman became seriously ill.<sup>45</sup> According to Raymond, Catherine implored Christ for "a special grace, the ability to perceive the beauty of all the souls she came into contact with, so that she would be the more prompted to work for their salvation."<sup>46</sup> The point for my purposes is that in the midst of this terribly corrupt period in the Church's life, Christ nevertheless brought to be—through the instrumentality of the Church—a great saint who built up the Church rather than tearing it down.

Like Catherine, Bernard of Clairvaux was a man who could recognize his own sinfulness.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, for Bernard, the humble and merciful person always treats the sinner as a fellow sinner, a brother or sister. From this perspective, Bernard was able to help the Church of his day to fight against its own worldliness. Bernard's ability to name and condemn ecclesiastical sins in a constructive way is on display in his *On the Conduct and Office of Bishops*. He describes the risks of ecclesiastical promotion: "Blinded to danger by their own ambition, they have their appetites further whetted by these signs of success which they observe with envy. Limitless ambition and insatiable greed! . . .

45. Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, trans. George Lamb (TAN, 2003), 134.

46. Raymond of Capua, 137.

47. For background, including with respect to Bernard's struggle with nervous illness and overzealous mortification leading to digestive problems (also experienced by Catherine), see Brian Patrick McGuire, *Bernard of Clairvaux: An Inner Life* (Cornell University Press, 2020).

Made a bishop, he wants to be an archbishop.”<sup>48</sup> Bernard goes on to deplore how a bishop always seeks to increase the size of the territory he governs. He writes all this to an actual archbishop, Henry of Sens, whom he desires to lift up to the higher things of Christ. Hardly without error himself, Bernard’s greatness consists in his willingness to call himself and others to be what a Christian should be—and can be by the Spirit’s power.

To give a final example, Gertrude the Great in the thirteenth century recalls a dark time in which she had “largely lost the delight of the presence of God.”<sup>49</sup> Gertrude’s account of what happens next is extraordinary. She interiorly sees a blossoming garden with a stream of honey, and she hears God ask her whether she would prefer dwelling in this garden, with its pleasures, over communion with God. God then shows her a seemingly inferior garden. Lastly, God interprets these two visions. The blossoming garden watered by honey symbolizes “an easy, honorable life, without any trouble, finding favor in human eyes and a reputation for every kind of holiness.”<sup>50</sup> Gertrude has rejected this garden; she wants instead the greatest possible communion with Christ, which, as God explains, is symbolized by the thornier garden of the second vision. Overjoyed by hearing this explanation of her time of dark trial (in configuration to Christ), Gertrude then describes herself as follows: she “leant on the bosom of her beloved with such great pressure and constant adherence that it seemed to her that the force of all creation would not be strong enough to shift her even a little.”<sup>51</sup>

48. Bernard of Clairvaux, “Letter 42: To Henry, Archbishop of Sens,” in *On Baptism and the Office of Bishops*, trans. Pauline Matarasso (Cistercian Publications, 2004), 37–82, at 70. For further background to Bernard’s theology and life, see Adriaan H. Bredero, *Bernard of Clairvaux: Between Cult and History* (Eerdmans, 1996); and G.R. Evans, *Bernard of Clairvaux* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

49. Gertrude the Great of Helfta, *The Herald of God’s Loving-Kindness: Book Three*, trans. Alexandra Barratt (Cistercian, 1999), 33.

50. Gertrude the Great of Helfta, 34.

51. Gertrude the Great of Helfta, 34. For further background to Gertrude’s theology, see Ella Johnson, *This Is My Body: Eucharistic Theology and Anthropology in the Writings of Gertrude the Great of Helfta* (Liturgical, 2020).

When addressing contemporary conflicts and debates, we must emulate the courage, charity, and patient trust of these saints, and we must also remember that these saints are still with us in the Church, united in prayer with the will of the Lord Jesus.<sup>52</sup> The constant presence of the saints and the blessed angels, under Christ's Headship, does not imply any cheap triumphalism, as though the Church today (or Catholics today) could avoid sharing in "the great tribulation" (Rev 7:14). Far from it. In the midst of internal and external trials, believers must implore Jesus for help and rely on his power while actively seeking to do his will and (as Michael Allen emphasizes) praying to possess "his joy to the fullest, the very joy that carried him in his darkest hours (Heb 12:2)."<sup>53</sup> Again, joyful trust in the Lord does not mean passivity on the part of believers, as though nothing could destabilize Christ's Church. After all, Jesus warns in a manner that crushes complacency, "When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8). Our task when faced with worldliness in the Church is to "[speak] the truth in love" while letting "no evil talk come out of [our] mouths, but only such as is good for edifying . . . that it may impart grace to all who hear" (Eph 4:15, 29).

### III. ECCLESIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS FOR A CONFLICTED CHURCH

There already exist numerous comprehensive systematic studies of, or introductions to, the Catholic Church. I think especially of such works as Benoît-Dominique de La Soujeole's *Introduction to the Mystery of the Church* and Charles Journet's multi-volume *The Church of the Word Incarnate*. Journet brilliantly provides an integrated theology of the Trinitarian missions, the Church (inclusive

52. For the importance of the Church Triumphant, see E. L. Mascall, *Corpus Christi: Essays on the Church and the Eucharist*, 2nd ed. (Longmans, Green, 1965), 21. See also Mascall, *Christ, the Christian and the Church: A Study of the Incarnation and Its Consequences* (Longmans, Green, 1946).

53. Allen, *Fear of the Lord*, 47.

of its hierarchy and jurisdiction), and the history of salvation.<sup>54</sup> Among the great *ressourcement* theologians, Yves Congar, Louis Bouyer, and Joseph Ratzinger particularly stand out for the careful attention that they give to the Church; and Hans Urs von Balthasar is not far behind. *Lumen Gentium* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* offer profound and doctrinally weighty ecclesiologies.<sup>55</sup> Guy Mansini's recent textbook *Ecclesiology* is noteworthy for its insight and erudition.<sup>56</sup> Readers seeking comprehensive theological accounts of the Church should consult these writings, which have informed my book.

What I seek to offer instead is a set of reflections on the reality of the Church, filled with the Spirit of truth and united to Christ on the path of his cross, in light of the ongoing problems of sin, conflict, error, and division. The theological reality of the Church is not its ideal reality but rather is its revealed (in Scripture and Tradition) reality.<sup>57</sup> My first five chapters focus upon biblically

54. See Benoît-Dominique de La Soujeole, OP, *Introduction to the Mystery of the Church*, trans. Michael J. Miller (The Catholic University of America Press, 2014); and see the multi-volume English translation of Charles Journet, *The Church of the Word Incarnate* (Emmaus Academic Press, 2025). See also John F. O'Neill, *Trinitarian Ecclesiology: Charles Journet, the Divine Missions, and the Mystery of the Church* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2024). For Journet, as O'Neill says, the Church is "a visible communion in fully Christic charity. Each individual who possesses charity is related properly to the Holy Spirit. . . . The assumed humanity of Christ that is related to the person of the Holy Spirit is the conjoined instrument of the Word for distributing habitual grace and charity to others by which they are indwelt by and related to the Holy Spirit" (*Trinitarian Ecclesiology*, 339–40).

55. For discussion, see Joseph Ratzinger, "The Ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council," in *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, 3–28, including its "Appendix: Modern Variations of the Concept of the People of God." Indebted to Endre von Ivánka's *Rhömäerreich und Gottesvolk: Das Glaubens-, Staats- und Volksbewußtsein der Byzantiner und seine Auswirkung auf die ostkirchlich-osteuropäische Geisteshaltung* (Karl Alber, 1968), Ratzinger addresses distortions of the notion of the "people of God": "The oldest roots of the transformation of the concept of the people of God into something political are visible in Eusebius of Caesarea: in his idea of Christians as the 'third nation' to which the 'two others,' the pagans and the Jews, lead up. If Clement of Alexandria presented the providential role of the Greeks, what we get with Eusebius is the evaluation of the Roman Empire in terms of salvation history and its classification within God's plan of salvation. . . . From this point of view Constantine's empire appears not just as the summit of Roman civilization but as the fulfilment and completion of that line of tradition whose prototype is to be found in Abraham. This nation of people is now at work absorbing the other nations into itself and creating from all of them the 'new people of God' promised by the prophets" (Ratzinger, "The Ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council," 23).

56. See Guy Mansini, OSB, *Ecclesiology* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2021).

57. Ratzinger points out that theologians can themselves act as though theology is irrelevant: "Theology can quite simply, instead of seeking truth itself in its authoritative texts, explain

revealed images of the Church: Bride of Christ, Family of God, Body of Christ, People of God, and Mother. To these chapters, I add two further ones, on the Church's marks of apostolicity and catholicity, respectively. An earlier book, *Engaging the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, already took up ecclesiological themes, including the kingdom of God, the Church and the Holy Spirit, and the marks of unity and holiness; and I discussed the Church in relation to the people of Israel in my *Engaging the Doctrine of Israel*.<sup>58</sup> This explains why I do not treat either Israel or the kingdom of God in the present book, as well as why the present book only treats two marks of the Church and does not explore the image of the "Temple of the Spirit." Mariological reflections, with intrinsic reference to the Church, shape my *Engaging the Doctrine of Jesus (and Mary)*, and so I have not repeated that material in this book.<sup>59</sup>

While affirming that the Church is constituted by the Holy Spirit's action, the ecclesologist Nicholas M. Healy states, "Conflict, error and sin are inherent aspects of the concrete church."<sup>60</sup> Although I do not agree with all that he means by this (since the "concrete church" includes its divine dimension), I attend to

the historical conditions in which these texts arose, try to reconstruct their original significance by using historical methods, and compare them critically with the interpretations which have come into being during the course of their history" (Ratzinger, "Theology and the Church's Political Stance," in *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, 152–64, at 157). As Ratzinger indicates, such positivism makes attractive (by comparison) critical theory's turn to praxis.

58. See my *Engaging the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit: Love and Gift in the Trinity and the Church* (Baker Academic, 2016); and my *Engaging the Doctrine of Israel: A Christian Israelology in Dialogue with Ongoing Judaism* (Cascade, 2021).

59. See my *Engaging the Doctrine of Jesus (and Mary): A Traditional, Historical-Critical, and Mariological Christology* (Cascade, 2025). For an extensive discussion, covering every angle, see Pierre Kocian, OSB, *Marie et l'Église: Compénétration des deux mystères* (Parole et Silence, 2018). See also John L. Nepil, *A Bride Adorned: Mary-Church Perichoresis in Modern Catholic Theology* (Emmaus Academic, 2023), 29: "Mary and the Church are first and foremost Christological realities. Without a doubt, the greatest concern in the history of the Mary-Church parallel has been preserving their right relationship to Jesus Christ. . . . Just as without him Mary and the Church would not exist, so too Mary and the Church are unintelligible apart from Christ." See also the work of the Protestant art historian Matthew J. Milliner, *Mother of the Lamb: The Story of a Global Icon* (Fortress, 2022); and Carrie Frederick Frost, *Maternal Body: A Theology of Incarnation from the Christian East* (Paulist, 2019).

60. Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 175.

both the divine and the human dimensions of the Church, a task that includes reflecting upon error and conflict. I take inspiration from Hans Urs von Balthasar's essay "Casta Meretrix" ("Chaste Harlot"), which sets forth the mystery of the Church in striking terms, drawn from the New Testament and the Church Fathers. As Balthasar states, "The New Testament speaks of the safeguards granted Christ's Church, but at the same time, in harsh juxtaposition, there is the threat of abuse, the possibility of defection. Nowhere is the immaculateness of the bride an established fact for the bride just to accept and not to worry about any further."<sup>61</sup> For Balthasar, and I agree with him, the solution is to face up to sin and to reach out for the cross, for Christ our Savior. The crucified Christ alone, not the Church's resources as such, is our "salvation and security."<sup>62</sup> The Church must follow the Savior always by "follow[ing] the way of the Cross in penance and conversion."<sup>63</sup>

In Mary, of course, the Church is fully holy; and the Church's sacraments and teachings are holy, as are the Church's offices or "structures she is given and guaranteed from above."<sup>64</sup> The issue is how to balance appreciating the beauty and truth of the Spirit-filled Church with the necessity of addressing the Church's present woundedness and conflict; and the resolution must be

61. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Casta Meretrix," trans. John Saward, in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 2, *Spouse of the Word* (Ignatius, 1991), 193–288, at 208. I should note that Balthasar draws insight regarding the sinfulness of the members of the Church from Emile Mersch, SJ, *The Theology of the Mystical Body*, trans. Cyril Vollert, SJ (Herder, 1951), 303. Mersch distinguishes between actions of the Church in which it is Christ who is acting (as in the sacraments and in solemn doctrinal and moral teaching), and actions of the Church in which it is humans who are acting (and who therefore inevitably act to some degree as sinners). See also Jacques Maritain, *On the Church of Christ: The Person of the Church and Her Personnel*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), 40: "The Church is the Beloved of Christ, she is His plenitude. And yet this same Church is penitent. She accuses herself, often in very harsh terms, she weeps for her failures, she begs to be purified, she pleads unceasingly for forgiveness (she does so every day in the Lord's Prayer), she sometimes cries out to God from the depths of the abyss, as from the depths of his anguish one who fears damnation. . . . The penitence of the Church shows us that if, in the image of Christ immaculate, the Church also is immaculate, she is not so however in the same manner as He is. In other words the mystical Body of Christ is not in the same relationship with its members as the physical body of Christ is with its."

62. Balthasar, "Casta Meretrix," 210.

63. Balthasar, 210.

64. Balthasar, 210; cf. 193.

cross-centered. Without this emphasis on the cross, ecclesiology would not be recognizable as the fruit of divine revelation within our sinful history. Indeed, without this emphasis, ecclesiology risks becoming an illusory sociology of immanent human progress.

The Catholic Church really is God's Bride, Family, Body, and People. Yet, the Catholic Church regularly endures turmoil and disillusionment, in which the face of the Church can be obscured. This fact can be deeply distressing. At times, Catholics have responded by falling into hasty solutions that do not address the spiritual root of the problem.<sup>65</sup> To take a contemporary example, in a nation that contains over sixty million non-Catholics, the Catholic Church in Germany in 2022 received only 1,447 converts—while over 500,000 Germans disaffiliated from the Catholic Church in that same year. Evangelization has nearly disappeared in German Catholicism, as has faith in the triune God,

65. See Adam A. J. DeVille's *Everything Hidden Shall Be Revealed: Ridding the Church of Abuses of Sex and Power* (Angelico, 2019). DeVille argues that the Church's structures of authority must be changed, now that we know the extent of the "sinister agenda" that pope and bishops have foisted upon the Church in their desperate cleaving to power (12). He recognizes, of course, that "no structures are fail-safe; no systems or processes are perfect; none can perfectly guarantee there will be no future problems" (14). But the will-to-power of the pope and bishops must be opposed, given that "for those who know a modicum of church history, it has always been this way—a powerful clergy descending into corruption until the much larger body of lay faithful in various ways rises up to push for change" (15). I disagree with this reading of Church history; it has just as often been holy clergy rising up to push deeply corrupt laity to change. To solve the problems in the Church of today, DeVille proposes the creation of "full and standing synods so that the task of governing a diocese now involves the laics and clergy having both voice and vote in matters of policy (not doctrine) and election, including the election of bishops. The national conferences of bishops, in turn, would be reconstituted so that . . . these conferences would become real, full, and properly functioning synods, again having legislative and electoral powers" (18–19). My concern is that this would further bog down the Church's members in party-politics, neglecting the real heart of the Church's life. It would end up privileging Church bureaucrats and turning the bishops (even more than already is the case) into bureaucrats and politicians. On the other hand, I agree with DeVille that the Church should resist an "unhealthy fixation of papal father-figures" (24), as though popes never err in any way. See also Antonio Rosmini's romantic view of the early Church, forgetting that politics generally involves bitter struggle and the early Church was often riven by doctrinal and moral disagreements: "In those days the people may be said to have been a faithful counsellor to the Church's rulers. An account was rendered by the Bishop to the people of all that he did in the government of the diocese. . . . Hence also arose the intimate union of Bishops with their presbyters, whose advice they sought in every matter concerning the government of the Church." Rosmini, *Of the Five Wounds of the Holy Church*, ed. H. P. Liddon (Rivingtons, 1883), 88–90; and see 246–54 on the election of bishops by clergy and laity.