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COMMUNITY
OF MISSIONARY DISCIPLES

The Continuing Creation of the Church

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Introduction

The pilgrim Church is missionary by its very nature.

—AD GENTES 2

Evangelizing . . . is the grace and vocation proper to the church, its deepest identity.

—EVANGELII NUNTIANDI 14

The Church which goes forth is a community of missionary disciples.

—EVANGELII GAUDIUM 24

This book is an attempt to develop a theology of the church that is thoroughly missionary—rooted in God’s triune, missionary nature, and participating in that nature through baptism. Its purpose is to unpack the powerful and important statements quoted above from Vatican II, from Paul VI’s landmark document on evangelization in today’s world, and from Pope Francis’s monumental statement on the joy of the gospel.

The book has been a long time in the making. I began teaching ecclesiology as a young theology professor in the Philippines over five decades ago. It was then that the crucial significance of Vatican II’s statement dawned on me—a phrase that, because it was articulated so late in the council’s development, was not recognized as the groundbreaking statement that it is. My realization grew as I continued to teach ecclesiology in subsequent years and began to read and publish in the area of the theology of mission. Mission, as mission theologians insist, is not simply *one thing* the church does; it is the activity that calls the church into existence, that gives the church its “deepest identity,” and without which the church would cease to exist.¹ As Mennonite missiologist Wilbert Shenk expresses it, mission is prior to the church.²

¹ See, among others, Darrell Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); and Cheryl M. Petersen, *Who Is the Church? An Ecclesiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013). My early intuitions were confirmed by an article by Roger D. Haight, SJ, “Mission: The Symbol for the Understanding of the Church Today,” *Theological Studies* 37, no. 4 (December 1976): 620–49.

² Wilbert R. Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 7.

MISSION

Mission is the gracious, healing, liberating, life-giving, forgiving, transforming action of God, the work of reconciliation that has been “entrusted to us” (2 Cor 5:19). Mission is, first and foremost, the mission of God, whose triune life of perfect giving and receiving spills over into the creation of the universe through the power of the Creator Spirit and Divine Word. It is the work of a God who chooses a people “in whom all will find a blessing” (Gen 12:2). It is God’s Word becoming flesh, Jesus of Nazareth, and his anointing by the Spirit. The same Spirit that anointed Jesus then anoints his disciples after his death and resurrection, giving them the mandate and the power to continue Jesus’s Spirit-inspired work “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). As Jesus’s disciples realize that they now share and are to continue Jesus’s mission, the church comes into being. It is, therefore, “missionary by its very nature” (AG 2). It is in its essence a communion-in-mission, a “community of missionary disciples” (EG 27). Strictly speaking, the church does not have a mission. The mission—God’s mission—has a church, and that church is constantly being created as it engages in that mission, led by the Spirit.

Mission, to paraphrase former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, is finding out where the Triune God is at work and joining in.³ It is working as a partner with God in bringing creation to completion. It is much more than a territorial or geographical concept. Mission happens, as the hymn goes, “across the world, across the street.”⁴ It is about working for a healing, liberation, and wholeness that emerges fully as individuals and communities live in relation to Jesus Christ and his gospel, but which cooperates with that gospel’s presence even when found outside the boundaries of explicit Christian faith. It is the commitment of the Christian community to exclude no people or no place from God’s presence and love. And it is a commitment as well to be surprised as the Spirit moves the church beyond its comfort zones, constantly calling it to be created anew. Mission is what calls the church to be church, as it calls the church to participate more deeply in the transformed and transforming discipleship of Jesus, to

³ See Rowan Williams, “Fresh Expressions” website. Cited also in Kirsteen Kim, *Joining in with the Spirit: Connecting World Church and Local Mission* (London: Epworth Press, 2010), 1. I have discovered, however, that a similar phrase was used much earlier by John V. Taylor, Anglican bishop and former secretary of the Church Mission Society. Taylor’s wording is: “Mission means seeing what God is doing in a situation and trying to do it with him.” See *CMS Newsletter*, no. 382 (June 1974). The collection of newsletters is in the Max Warren Collection at the headquarters of the Church Mission Society, Oxford, UK. The phrase is quoted in Cathy Ross and Jonny Baker, *Imagining Mission with John V. Taylor* (London: SCM, 2020), xi.

⁴ Fred Pratt Green (text), “The Church of God in Every Age,” Hope Publishing Co., 1971 rev.

which the Spirit constantly invites it. More and more over the years I have realized that mission is about working as a partner with the Triune God in the completion of God's entire creation.

Mission continues to call the church into being, and so continues to create the church. This is the point of the subtitle of this book: *The Continuing Creation of the Church*. Just as the mission of God called Jesus into mission at his baptism, just as the Spirit of Christ called Jesus's disciples into continuing Jesus's mission and therefore called them to be church, so the Spirit of Christ is constantly calling the church into mission and so into being. The church is constantly being created by the summons of Jesus and the power of the Spirit to embody, demonstrate, and proclaim the "revolutionary intimacy"⁵ that is the reign of God.

A MISSIONARY ECCLESIOLOGY

Because of such a deep realization of the church's missionary nature, I have been increasingly dissatisfied over the years with ecclesiology as it has been taught, written about, and ultimately lived out by Christians. Ecclesiology has simply not been *missiological* enough. Although there have been exceptions in the last decade or so,⁶ most ecclesiologies—particularly Roman Catholic ecclesiologies—speak of the church's mission in ways that tack it on to the end of thinking and practice rather than placing it at the beginning or allowing it to shape the whole project.⁷ Such ecclesiologies may be excellent

⁵ Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2017), 29.

⁶ See, for example, Craig van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000); Guder, *Missional Church*; Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church: A People Called and Sent*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023); Neil Ormerod, *Revisoning the Church: An Experiment in Systematic-Historical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014); World Council of Churches, Commission on Faith and Order, *The Church: Toward a Common Vision* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013); Peterson, *Who Is the Church*; Richard R. Gaillardetz and Edward P. Hahnenberg, eds., *A Church with Open Doors: Catholic Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, A Michael Glazier Book, 2015); Michael W. Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018); Lalsangkima Pachuau, *God at Work in the World: Theology and Mission in the Global Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022).

⁷ See, for example, Peter C. Phan, ed., *The Gift of the Church: A Textbook on Ecclesiology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, A Michael Glazier Book, 2000); Thomas P. Rausch, *Toward a Truly Catholic Church: An Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, A Michael Glazier Book, 2005); Walter Kasper, *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality, and Mission* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); John Fuellenbach, *Church: Community for the Kingdom* (Maryknoll,

pieces of scholarship, but to my mind they do not get to the dynamic center of what the church is about.

On the other hand, those who study and reflect on the church's mission—missiologists—have not seemed to me to be *ecclesiological* enough. Missiology as it has developed in the century or so that it has emerged as a discreet theological discipline has been particularly influenced by history, anthropology, and the social sciences. It is not that these disciplines are not important, of course, but they focus on the historical developments of the church or how missionaries should proceed in their boundary-crossing work and not on the missionary nature of the church itself. In addition, much of missiology has been pioneered by Protestant, evangelical, and—in the last several decades—Pentecostal thinkers, and so there is not always the sense of the high ecclesiology that Catholics need to bring to it.⁸

What I have tried to present in this work is a *missionary ecclesiology*, or an *ecclesiological missiology*. The time, I believe, is ripe for this. It is anticipated in the lapidary phrase in Vatican II's *Decree on Mission*, which speaks of the church as “missionary by its very nature” (AG 2). It is anticipated as well by the central role that evangelization plays in Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN 14). It is expressed powerfully in Pope Francis's “dream of a ‘missionary option’” for the church, a commitment to “transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation” (EG 27). It has been expressed as well by the participants in the 2019 Pan-Amazonian Synod, emphasizing the importance of “a missionary church reaching-out,”⁹ and in the theme of the 2021–24 Synod on Synodality, which recognizes that the church must

NY: Orbis Books, 2002); Paul Collins, “Ecclesiology and World Mission/*Missio Dei*,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*, ed. Gerard Mannion and Lewish S. Mudge (New York: Routledge, 2010), 623–36.

⁸ Three recent, very beautiful books on missiology from the Protestant and evangelical traditions are filled with implicit ecclesiology but do not focus fully—or as fully as I would like—on the church. They are “must reads” in missiology, however: Alexander Forsyth, *Mission by the People: Rediscovering the Dynamic Missiology of Tom Allan and His Scottish Contemporaries* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017); Al Tizon, *Whole and Reconciled: Gospel, Church, and Mission in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018); and Samuel E. Ewell III, *Faith Seeking Conviviality: Reflections on Ivan Illich, Christian Mission, and the Promise of Life Together* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019). Cathy Ross and Jonny Baker, *Imagining Mission with John V. Taylor*, does focus rather prominently on ecclesiology, but the authors come from the Anglican evangelical tradition.

⁹ See *The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology: Final Document*, October 26, 2019, 20–40.

renew itself in communion and participation so as to discover its mission more clearly.¹⁰

In March 2022, Pope Francis unveiled the document that initiated the long-awaited reform of the Roman Curia that had been one of the mandates of his papacy. Significantly, the document is entitled *Praedicate Evangelium* (preach the gospel) and signals an important change of direction in the understanding of the church. Now, mission and evangelization are clearly at its center. Emblematic of this shift in emphasis is the fact that the new Dicastery for Evangelization is now listed first in the list of the Vatican dicasteries (the new name given to all of the curial bodies, from *dikasterion* in Greek, meaning a law court), replacing the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith that formerly headed the list. Since the order of listing and presentation is always something of theological significance,¹¹ this new ordering points subtly to the fact that doctrine is now at the service of mission, not vice-versa. In addition, the pope himself will head this dicastery.¹² The process—at least officially and theoretically—is now complete. In a felicitous phrase of ecclesiologist Richard R. Gaillardetz, “a missionary council has inspired a missionary pope to create a missionary church.”¹³

A COMMUNITY OF MISSIONARY DISCIPLES

For a number of years I have been persuaded that the best way to think about the church is as a community (or communion)-in-mission. As I have told my students over the years, the most important part of this description of the church are the hyphens, because communion and mission are inextricably linked together and ordered to one another. To my great delight, borrowing from the Latin American bishops’ Aparecida document of 2007 in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis describes the church

¹⁰ Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission: Preparatory Document*, 2021.

¹¹ See, for example, Richard R. Gaillardetz’s discussion of the revision and reordering of the chapters of Vatican II’s document on the church in *The Church in the Making: Lumen Gentium, Christus Dominus, Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), 8–27.

¹² The document was published on March 19, 2022. See *The Apostolic Constitution Preach the Gospel, Praedicate Evangelium* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2022). See also Austen Ivereigh, “Rome on Mission: Pope Francis Reforms the Curia,” *Commonweal* 149, no. 2 (May 2022): 10–12.

¹³ Richard R. Gaillardetz, “Francis Wishes to Release Vatican II’s Bold Vision from Captivity,” *NCR Online* (September 25, 2013).

as a “community of missionary disciples.”¹⁴ This description of the church, I believe, is exactly right, and it struck me right away that a sustained reflection on the phrase would be a fine way to organize this book. Accordingly, I have divided the book into three major sections, each of which has recourse to Francis’s/Aparecida’s description of the church as a “community of missionary disciples.”

In the first part I consider the *essence* of the church as a “community of missionary disciples.” Then, in Part II, I focus on the *mystery* of the church by reflecting on it as a “community of missionary disciples.” Finally, I consider the *structure* of the church as a “community of missionary disciples.” In every section the church’s essential missionary nature is the lens through which the church is understood. The first part begins with God’s triune, missionary nature that overflows in the act of creation through the mission of the Holy Spirit and the Divine Word. The Spirit, present from the first moment of the “Big Bang,” works in the history of Israel and is poured out on Jesus of Nazareth as he witnesses to, serves, and proclaims—or embodies, demonstrates, and proclaims, in the terms that I prefer to use in this book—the reign of God and, after his death and resurrection, shares that mission with his disciples.

The second section focuses on the fact that the church, as sharer in God’s mission, is no mere human society but a reality “imbued with the hidden presence of God.”¹⁵ First it treats the classical images of the church as people, body, and temple (creation of the Spirit) as dynamic missionary images. Then it reflects on the classical dimensions or marks of the church, more as verbs and in reverse order, beginning with apostolicity. The third and final section argues that the structure of the church is what serves its mission. The church’s structure is based on the fundamental equality of the discipleship resulting from baptism, and any structure of the church exists to develop, direct, and form that discipleship, so that disciples can participate more fully and consciously in their baptismal calling of participating in God’s mission by continuing that of Jesus. We will speak of “baptismal missionary discipleship,” “ministerial missionary discipleship,” and “ordained missionary discipleship.”

¹⁴ Aparecida document, CELAM website, 443, 449; EG 27, 120. Francis, as Jorge Mario Bergoglio, was one of the principal authors of the Aparecida document. Interestingly, the phrase that appears most in the Aparecida document is “disciples and missionaries” rather than “missionary disciples.” However, in EG 120, Francis remarks that “we no longer say that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries,’ but rather that we are always ‘missionary disciples.’”

¹⁵ Paul VI, Opening Address of the Second Session of Vatican II, in *Enchiridion Vaticanum* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1968), 97.

Readers of the book may recognize that the threefold structure of the book echoes the threefold structure of Hans Küng's 1967 book *The Church*.¹⁶ This is deliberate. Despite the fact that Küng's book is well over a half-century old and that some parts might still be considered somewhat controversial (for example, his treatment of church structure and papal ministry), I still consider his work the most thorough and most important book on ecclesiology written since the close of the Second Vatican Council in 1965.

My work does not follow Küng's developments all that closely and is much more missionary in its focus. Nevertheless, I do believe that the organization of Küng's book is exactly the right approach to ecclesiology. Ecclesiology is rooted in the mission of God that is carried out most fully by Jesus of Nazareth in his witness in word and deed to the reign or "kin-dom" of God. That the church is no mere human, voluntary society is firmly rooted in the faith. As Vatican II insisted, the church is first and foremost a mystery, "a reality imbued with the presence of God," to quote Paul VI once again.¹⁷ Ultimately, while its structure is of "secondary, even tertiary importance,"¹⁸ that structure exists only in order to serve the mission that it shares and continues as God's people, Christ's body, and the Spirit's presence in the world, calling the world in apostolic commission to unity in diversity, unity in communion, and dedication to God and creation in holiness.

A WORKING DEFINITION

It might be important, already here in the Introduction, to offer what I call a working definition of the church, a definition that I will unpack as I unpack the three statements from Vatican II, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, and *Evangelii Gaudium* above. Of course, the church cannot ever be adequately defined. It is, as Vatican II has taught, a mystery—a reality that Christians come to know as they participate in the church's life, and one that defies precise definition. Nevertheless, I think I can offer a working definition that helps readers navigate these pages and serves as a kind of touchstone for what follows:

The church is God's pilgrim people, called and gathered together by the Spirit in all its diversity, in faith in the risen Christ, in order to embody, demonstrate, and proclaim the reign of God, which it believes was inaugurated in and through Jesus, whose mission it shares and continues

¹⁶ Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967).

¹⁷ Paul VI, Opening Speech of the Second Session of Vatican II, 97.

¹⁸ Küng, *The Church*, 363.

both within the church and within the world, and celebrates in and is nourished by word and sacrament for its missionary life.

This definition has grown in length and precision over the years, especially thanks to my students and friends in the Philippines, Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Australia, and the students and participants from all over the world in both the Hesburgh Program for Continuing Ministry and the Institute of Religious Formation at Catholic Theological Union. Of note is the order of the three aspects of Jesus's and the church's mission—beginning first with embodiment or witness, then embodied service or demonstration, and only then verbal preaching or proclamation. Originally I used the terms *witness to*, *serve*, and *preach*, but I think *embody*, *demonstrate*, and *proclaim* express the reality of the church's mission in a more graphic and more accessible way. It is my way of expressing, in a more missionary key, the “threefold office of Christ” in which Vatican II insisted all Christians participate through their baptism (see LG 10–12; AA 3; PO 2).¹⁹ In a similar way the liturgical and celebratory nature of the church was first pointed out by these perceptive students. I am deeply grateful for their important reactions and observations. Like the church itself, this definition will probably grow and change as it continues to be shaped by those who dialogue with it.

Each phrase of this working definition is significant. First of all, the church is a *people*—*God's* people. It is not first of all a hierarchy, but a community. It is an *ordered* people but one rooted in the fundamental “great dignity” (EG 104) of baptism and the lavish distribution of gifts that the Spirit bestows. That Spirit *gathers* the church. The church is not a voluntary society in the sense that that the personal choice that people make comes from their own initiative. Being a member of the church is, rather, a personal response to divine grace, to divine initiative and invitation. A great part of pastoral work on the part of the church's ministers is to foster that sense of graced election and deepen Christians' commitment to mission. Such election, of course, is not for privilege, as Lesslie Newbigin points out, but for mission and service.²⁰

The church is a *pilgrim* people. As the subtitle of this book emphasizes, the church is never finished, never fully created by the gathering Spirit. It is the *pilgrim* church that is “missionary by its very nature” (AG 2). As Pope Francis writes, while the church “is a *mystery* rooted in the Trinity,” it “exists concretely in history as a people of pilgrims and evangelizers, transcending institutional expression, however necessary” (EG 111). As the church journeys

¹⁹ See Amanda C. Osheim, “The Christian Faithful,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Vatican II*, ed. Richard R. Gaillardetz, 211–31 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 222–24.

²⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 80–88.

through history and meets new ideas and realities that emerge along the way, it changes, it grows, and its message and structure do as well. It is always “on the move” (TTL 55–79), a “verb,” as Godfrey Rust envisions it in the poem that precedes Part I of this book.

Such an invitation is to *faith in the risen Christ*. To be a member of the church is to have committed oneself to the servant Lordship of Christ,²¹ risen from the dead and living now in the midst of his disciples. Although all peoples “are called to be part of this catholic unity of the People of God” (LG 13), not all people of good will are members of the church. What makes a person a member of the church is a person’s adherence to faith—in its intellectual, affective, and behavioral dimensions²²—to Jesus the Christ.

This does not mean, of course, that God’s Spirit and the risen Lord are not present and active outside the boundaries of the church, offering all the possibility of salvation through participation in the paschal mystery (GS 22). As Vatican II reminds us, membership in the church is not assurance of salvation, although, as I shall argue in this book, it offers, at least objectively, the best *means* (community, tradition, sacraments) of attaining to salvation’s fullness (see LG 14). Nevertheless, as St. Augustine put it well over a millennium ago, “Many who seem to be without are in reality within, yet many who seem within yet really are without.”²³

The point of the church, then, is not about—at least not in the first place—attaining salvation or avoiding eternal punishment. Rather, it exists *in order to embody, demonstrate, and proclaim the reign* (or “*kin-dom*”) of God, to work with God in the transformation of the world and the completion of God’s creation. It is precisely in this self-giving that one finds the fullness of life—salvation (see EG 10). The church exists, in other words, as a community of missionary disciples, “missionary by its very nature” (AG 2). The church’s existence as church depends on its life of wordless, authentic witness (embodiment); self-effacing, self-sacrificing service (demonstration); and clear, confident, and yet humble proclamation of the gospel *about* and *of* Jesus of Nazareth.

²¹ *Lordship* is, like *kingdom* or *reign*, on which I will reflect below, a difficult word in today’s world, where any kind of hegemony, hierarchy, and patriarchy is, with reason, suspicious. I use it here—and in other places in this work—recognizing nevertheless the word’s inadequacy and even danger. The word aims, I believe, at expressing a deep relationship in love to Christ, conscious of the paradox expressed by theologian Karl Rahner that, with God, the *more* we give ourselves over in relationship, the more we experience selfhood, identity, and true freedom. See Karl Rahner, “On the Theology of the Incarnation,” *Theological Investigations* IV (Baltimore: Helicon Press), 117.

²² See Stephen Bevans, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 29–31.

²³ Augustine, *On Baptism: Against the Donatists*, Book V, Chapter 27, paragraph 38.

The order here is significant. The church must first of all *embody* in its members the joy, healing, and integrity in which membership in the Christian community results. It must express this in real demonstrations of *service* to humankind and to all creation; and, when opportune and “whenever God opens a door of speech” (AG 13), the church must *proclaim* both humbly and boldly²⁴ the person and the gospel with which it has been entrusted. Mission, as we will express it, is done in “prophetic dialogue.”²⁵

This mission of embodying, demonstrating, and proclaiming is not, however, about the church itself. The church “is not of ultimate importance.”²⁶ The church exists *in order* to witness to, serve, and proclaim the *kingdom, reign, realm* (or “*kin-dom*”) of God. The term *kingdom* has the disadvantage of being an androcentric term on the one hand, and, as many scholars point out, a more territorial reference than the more dynamic *reign* of God. This reality is already and yet not fully inaugurated in the world, and the church is a sacrament of this already present and yet not fully inaugurated reality. It is not so much a *place*, although a wholly worldly reality, and so the traditional word *kingdom* is not an adequate translation of the original Greek word *basileia*. Jesus embodies, demonstrates, and proclaims a *life-giving and life-sustaining relationship*, a reality better described by the translation *reign*. However, even this word bears connotations of hegemony that are present in the original *basileia* or even its Hebrew equivalent *malkuth*. Others offer translations using *commonweal* or *commonwealth*, but neither of these is a direct translation.²⁷

Perhaps even more suggestive of its meaning—although also not really a translation—is the term *kin-dom*.²⁸ Similar to trinitarian theologians’ play on *perichoresis* to speak of trinitarian relationships as a never-ending and world-including dance, this wordplay points to the new possibilities of kinship that God offers and is working for in the world—a kinship of all the world’s peoples and kinship as well with creation itself. In his popular books on his work with gangs in East Los Angeles, Gregory Boyle speaks of how Christians

²⁴ “Humbly and boldly” here refers to David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 489.

²⁵ See Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 348–52.

²⁶ Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 7.

²⁷ For a discussion of the limits of *commonwealth*, see Neil Darragh, *But What Is the Church For?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2021), 29–30.

²⁸ The introduction of the wordplay of *kin-dom* has been attributed to Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “Solidarity: Love of Neighbor in the 1980s,” in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, 31–40 (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), 32, 306n8.

must acknowledge and develop “radical kinship” among all peoples.²⁹ As I have indicated already in this introduction, African American theologian Willie Jennings uses the term “revolutionary intimacy” to refer to the message of the gospel in his commentary on the Acts of the Apostles.³⁰ Terrence Tilley points out that the eminent Southern biblical scholar Clarence Jordan translates the Greek *basileia* as “the God movement.”³¹ Irish theologian and ethicist Enda McDonagh offers another intriguing phrase that identifies the reality of Jesus’s use of *basileia tou theou*. McDonagh speaks of the goal of Christianity as the establishment of *shalom* (the rich Hebrew word for peace—and more), and renders it in English as “flourishing in community.”³² New Zealand theologian Neil Darragh proposes the term “realm of God” as “what the world would be like if it were in accordance with the will of a benevolent God.” It is a dynamic state—already present today and moving toward fulfillment—of what he names as “wellbeing.”³³ My own solution in this book is to use all these words at one time or another and to juxtapose them to one another, depending on how they “sound” in a sentence, or to offer variety of expression. None is perfect, and using all of them might somehow approach the richness of the concept, which, as I point out in Chapter 1, comes out more in the *story* of Jesus than in a definition.

Such kinship has already been inaugurated *by and in* Jesus. Jesus’s mission of mercy, justice, inclusion, and healing was a sign of the inbreaking of this new order of possibilities, and Jesus himself, the *autobasileia* in Origen’s famous description, was already the full expression of the new kinship that God, in the power of the Spirit, was about in the world.³⁴

The central thesis of this book is that the church *shares and continues* that mission. At Pentecost the disciples were anointed with the same Spirit with which Jesus was anointed at his baptism, and, as the Acts of the Apostles is at pains to show, they are to take Jesus’s place in the world and continue

²⁹ Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 187–212; *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017); *The Whole Language: The Power of Extravagant Tenderness* (New York: Avid Reader Press, Simon and Schuster, 2021).

³⁰ Jennings, *Acts*, 29.

³¹ See Terrence W. Tilley, *The Disciples’ Jesus: Christology as Reconciling Practice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 1n1.

³² Enda McDonagh, “From Shoah to Shalom: The Case for Abolishing War in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Vulnerable to the Holy: In Faith, Morality, and Art*, 127–36 (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2004), 133.

³³ Darragh, *But What Is The Church For?*, 40. Darragh develops the term *wellbeing* in chap. 4, 41–51.

³⁴ Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, Book XIV.7 (commentary on Matt 18:23). See Fred Sanders, “The Kingdom in Person,” *The Scriptorium* (July 28, 2015).

his mission. Paul in particular recognizes this reality in much of the imagery by which he describes the significance of Christian baptism—for example, adopted sonship and daughterhood, identity as the body of Christ in the world, conformity to Christ, putting on Christ.

The church shares and continues Jesus’s ministry both *within itself* and *within the world*. On the one hand, the church needs to evangelize itself. It is constantly in need of evangelization (EN 15)—forgiveness, purification, inspiration, and formation. But it does this—and this is the task of the church’s pastoral work—not simply to make itself perfect or make itself “worthy of salvation,” but in order to evangelize the world by the credibility of its witness and the zeal of working for the new kinship of the realm of God, to which deeper knowledge and deeper spirituality inspire it.

Finally, the church’s missionary commitment and life is *ritually enacted and celebrated in both word and sacrament*. In the attentive reading of and meditating on the word, especially in the context of the church’s liturgy, the church experiences a “rehearsal for ministry,” and prepares for the “liturgy after the liturgy,”³⁵ by which Christians live out the gospel in the witness of their daily lives. The church at worship is most fully the church especially at Eucharist, the high point of which is its dismissal into the world to “glorify God by your lives.”³⁶ Liturgy indeed is a missionary act, nourishing the church for its missionary life and sending forth Christians to proclaim the gospel by the way they live.

THE MEANING OF CHURCH IN THIS BOOK

What does the word *church* mean in this book? First and foremost, church means in these pages any community of Christian faith, however large or however small, from the worldwide community of local churches that make up the church universal to the “two or three” (Mt 18:20) gathered in Jesus’s name for prayer, witness, sharing of life, or apostolic activity. Vatican II speaks of the reality of the church “in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful” that are “united with their pastors” (LG 26). These could be “particular churches,” in other words, dioceses (see LG 13); parishes—territorial or other kinds; communities such as the basic ecclesial/missionary communities or small Christian communities that have sprung up all over the world in the last fifty years; communities of women and men of the various forms of consecrated life; or any community gathered around the eucharistic table of word and sacrament, even if these “are frequently small and poor,

³⁵ See Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 362–66.

³⁶ Dismissal Rite, *Revised Roman Missal*. See Gregory Augustine Pierce, *The Mass Is Never Ended* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2007).

or living far from any other” (LG 26). We can also speak of the family as the “domestic church” (LG 11) or the “ecclesiola,” in which the parents become the first evangelizers of their children. British Anglican theologian Michael Moynagh speaks about “new ecclesial communities” that have sprung up in many parts of the world as a result of the “fresh expressions” movement in Anglican and other churches throughout the world. Fellow Anglican theologian Pete Ward speaks of these ecclesiological innovations as “liquid church” and reflection on them “liquid ecclesiology.”³⁷

The mention of Anglican theologians raises the ecumenical question. From the ecumenical perspective of Roman Catholicism (from which this book is written), we can speak of the Orthodox Churches as churches in their own right, and of other Christian communities of faith (for example, Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, evangelical communities, and Pentecostal communities) as churches or “ecclesial communities” who possess “some, even very many, of the most significant elements or endowments which together go to build up and give life to the church itself” (UR 3, 18, 19).³⁸ At the 2022 Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC), Bishop Brian Farrell spoke eloquently of how the Catholic Church has gone beyond mere “observer” and become a real partner with its WCC sisters and brothers.³⁹

When we speak of church in this book, therefore, I also want to include any and all of these Christian communities. Although I write this book as a Roman Catholic, I also want to write it as much as possible in a thoroughly ecumenical spirit. Everything I say about the church in these pages refers, *mutatis mutandis*, to any or all of the above expressions of communal Christian faith.

In presenting the plan of this book to a group of my SVD confreres in Rome, an Indian confrere asked me if I meant to include members of communities in India and elsewhere who, although they are not baptized, nevertheless believe in Christ.⁴⁰ For many reasons—especially those of family exclusion or persecution—women and men live a life of faith that is not explicitly Christian, and yet is based on personal faith in Jesus, while maintaining many of

³⁷ Michael Moynagh, *Church in Life: Innovation, Mission, and Ecclesiology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018); Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), and *Liquid Ecclesiology: The Gospel and the Church* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

³⁸ Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church*, 108–19.

³⁹ WCC 11th Assembly, Karlsruhe Report, “Ecumenical Leaders Reflect on Steps to Unity and Common Witness,” *The Fig Tree* (February 2023).

⁴⁰ For examples of the literature around this issue, see Jonas P. Adelin Jørgensen, *Jesus Imandars and Christ Bhaktas: Two Case Studies of Interreligious Hermeneutics and Identity in Global Christianity* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008); and Dasan Jeyaraj, *Followers of Christ: Outside the Church in Chennai, India. A Socio-Historical Study of a Non-Church Movement* (Utrecht: Utrecht University Press, 2009).

their Hindu, or Muslim, or Buddhist customs and practices. Should they be included in the meaning of church in this book? my confrere asked.

The answer for me is a difficult one, but a very intriguing one as well. Vatican II includes catechumens, even though they are not yet baptized, as “joined to” the church. The tradition has always recognized a “baptism of desire.” The sacrament of baptism is surely not a “magic ritual” but a sacrament of faith. These convictions lead me to say that in some way, participants in these movements of “churchless Christianity” are, in at least some way, participants as well in the church, although certainly not yet fully and sacramentally incorporated (see LG 14–15).

A “BLUEPRINT ECCLESIOLOGY”?

Over two decades ago British Catholic theologian Nicholas Healey warned ecclesiologists against constructing “blueprint ecclesiologies” and urged them to develop an ecclesiology that was practical and prophetic. In this way ecclesiology would be done “from below,” from the concrete life of the church.⁴¹ While I certainly believe that this more “ethnographic” approach to ecclesiology is very important and very worthwhile, this book most likely falls within the “blueprint ecclesiology” category. It is written out of the conviction that, as a mystery “imbued with the presence of God,” and as a divinely founded community of faith, the ideal church that I write about here is what the church truly is in its deepest being, its deepest reality. I am offering here a *vision* of the church, convinced that this is what the church *should* be like to be true to its deepest and truest nature. But, because I take mission as the lens through which we need to understand the church, I am advocating not some abstract reality, but a community that is constantly discerning and responding to God’s prophetic action in the world, and so constantly changing, constantly on the move. In this sense I am not offering a blueprint as much as a compass for a pilgrim church to find its way and its identity in the world. If the church is true to its mission, it will be the church that the Triune God has called it to be.

⁴¹ See Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History*, 3 vols. (New York: Continuum, 2004, 2005, 2008). See Edward P. Hahnenberg, “A Theologian’s Perspective on Priesthood and Religious Life,” in *Priesthood in Religious Life: Searching for New Ways Forward*, ed. Stephen Bevans and Robin Ryan, 77–90 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, A Michael Glazier Book, 2018), 86–87.