

“In the spirit of Pentecost and in the Vatican II tradition of *aggiornamento*, this book is a work of zeal and passion for the life of the church. It is an ecclesial breath of fresh air dedicated to encouraging the generativity of the church, the necessity of conversion, the art of faithfulness, the gift of communal discernment, and more. All the while, this book keeps readers’ feet firmly on the ground, mindful of the most difficult ecclesial challenges of this historical moment. Erudite throughout. Beautifully written. Laity, priests, and bishops who love the church will discover in this book ‘a pearl of great price.’”

—Nancy Pineda-Madrid, T. Marie Chilton Chair of Catholic Theology,
Loyola Marymount University

“The fruit of Richard Lennan’s thirty years of teaching, reflections, and ministry, *Tilling the Church* applies to the Catholic Church the much-needed rationale, imperative, and dynamics of tilling the earth. Responding to Pope Francis’s call for ‘ecological conversion,’ Lennan explores the elements in the church that promote conversion: learning from both past accomplishments and failures, nourishing present signs of life, and being open to the possibilities in the unknowable future. Like a patient and experienced farmer, Lennan teaches us where, when, and how to plant the seeds of grace in the church-field, a task destined to remain an ‘unfinished project’ until the eschaton.”

—Peter C. Phan, The Ignacio Ellacuria Chair of Catholic Thought,
Georgetown University

“Viewing the church’s mystery through the lens of the mystery of divine grace and human freedom, Richard Lennan’s *Tilling the Church* opens up fresh perspectives on what ecclesial faithfulness to God requires. Continuity with the living Gospel demands creativity in passing on the faith in response to ever-new questions and challenges; the church must be always changing in order to maintain its identity. This stimulating book is a welcome reminder of the need for constant care in safeguarding the church’s full flourishing.”

—Ormond Rush, Australian Catholic University

“In *Tilling the Church*, Richard Lennan employs the ‘homely’ agricultural metaphor ‘tilling’ to help us recognize how God’s gift of Grace works to ‘till,’ ‘to cultivate’ us as church—opens us pilgrim people not only to our past, but to a future of healing, creating, and community in history and coaxes us to care for the earth and for *all* God’s human creatures—believers or not. This book encourages and lifts us in this time of anxiety and distress.”

—M. Shawn Copeland, Professor Emerita, Boston College

“Richard Lennan’s *Tilling the Church* is a mature, timely, and eloquent treatment of the current Catholic ecclesial moment . . . a ‘must read’ for all who are concerned for the health of the church and the quality of Catholic life into the future. Born of more than thirty years of praying, thinking, teaching, writing, and pastoral service, it weaves together a lucid synthesis of the key strains in post-conciliar ecclesiology and wider theology of Catholic life with a sustained constructive invitation to become discerning participants in the way of whole-church synodality for which Pope Francis calls. It is a book for our times, written with grace and love, and will be invaluable for students, teachers, pastors, and all interested laity alike.”

—Paul D. Murray, Durham University, UK

“Richard Lennan does not shy away from the crises facing the church. These issues and others call for a new theology of the church based on the historical manifestation of God’s grace in Christ and the Spirit. Lennan rises to this challenge with striking erudition and imagination. He describes the church as a Spirit-led community of faith and hope, grounded in a future-oriented past, conscious of itself as an unfinished project, and open to self-criticism in the service of the reign of God proclaimed by Jesus. He highlights the essential unity that exists between discipleship and apostolicity, change and tradition, preservation and innovation. Lennan is a creative theologian and a reliable guide in pointing to a number of different ways to address the multilayered challenges facing the church. This book is essential reading for all who care about the reform and the future of the Catholic Church in the twenty-first century.”

—Dermot A. Lane, Dublin City University

Tilling the Church

Theology for an Unfinished Project

Richard Lennan



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For

Liz

But grace is here. It is present wherever we are.

Karl Rahner

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Acknowledgments

“The Church” was the first theological course I taught. That was in 1992, immediately after I completed my dissertation on Karl Rahner’s ecclesiology. Since that beginning, the course on ecclesiology, under various titles and in ever-evolving formulations, has been the staple of my teaching. Likewise, “the church” has remained the focus of my research and writing—to say nothing of constant wondering.

During the last thirty years, I have had the graced opportunity to explore ecclesiology with a generation of students, beginning at the Catholic Institute of Sydney, then at Weston Jesuit School of Theology, and currently in the School of Theology and Ministry at Boston College. The students’ questions, insights, and longing to be part of a church that lives what it proclaims have deepened my understanding of the Christian community and helped me to refine my teaching. I am deeply grateful for the richness of that experience.

It has also been my privilege to participate over the last three decades in a national Plenary Council (Australia, 2021–22), a diocesan synod—happily, in my home diocese of Maitland-Newcastle—and to work with pastoral planners, priests, and renewal groups in many places. Amid oft-heard frustrations with numerous aspects of the church, this involvement has confirmed for me the overwhelming desire of Catholics that their community might be more faithful, more transparent, and more generous in its service of God and humanity. My hope is that this book’s analysis of the church and its mission does some justice to all that I have gained from being part of the pilgrim community of faith.

It is a pleasure to be able to acknowledge here the encouragement and support of family, friends, and colleagues, including my sisters

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I completed the manuscript for this book at Pentecost in 2021. Pentecost's focus on the Holy Spirit as the source of grace, and of the hope that grace engenders even in the midst of loss, seems especially fitting in the context of a world seeking to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. This reminder of the enduring presence of the Spirit and the transformative role of grace is always relevant for the life of the church that is, and will remain, an unfinished project.

Introduction

“Tilling,” writes Pope Francis, “refers to cultivating, plowing or working.”¹ In *Laudato Si’* (LS), his encyclical promoting care for the earth, humanity’s “common home,” the pope includes tilling among the activities that nurture the earth. The document describes the natural world as “a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity,” a status that establishes the physical environment as “the responsibility of everyone” (LS 95). Tilling the earth models human behavior that reverences rather than ravages this patrimony. As with the effort to nurture a vineyard (Isa 5:1-10) or stimulate the fertility of a fruitless fig tree (Luke 13:6-9), tilling fosters the earth’s potential for future bounty by supporting existing growth, attending to present needs, and redressing what neglect or misuse has wrought. Tilling, then, expands the likelihood that coming generations will receive their patrimony in a robust condition.

Against the backdrop of human-driven climate change that imperils the earth, Pope Francis supports efforts “to restore the various levels of ecological equilibrium, establishing harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God” (LS 210). To achieve this equilibrium, *Laudato Si’* advocates for “integral ecology.” This category weaves together God, humanity, and the physical environment, underscoring that humanity’s right relationship with

1. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* (LS), On Care for Our Common Home (2015), 67, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html. For analysis of *Laudato Si’* and its reception, see Michele Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism: Relevance and Renewal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 51–65.

God is inseparable from a right relationship with all that God creates, sustains, and fulfills.² Integral ecology, since it seeks to reflect God's desires for the whole of creation, extends its attention to political culture and social structures, both of which affect the human as well as the physical environment. From the perspective of integral ecology, the commitment to protect air and water against pollution requires not only support for low-impact manufacturing processes, but resistance to the siting of factories close to residential areas in which vulnerable human populations live. Integral ecology, then, champions policies that serve justice and equity in housing, health, and other social programs, as well as in access to natural resources and renewable energy.³

Consistent with his vision for integral ecology, Pope Francis depicts the retrieval of ecological equilibrium as critical for the health of humanity's relationship with the creator God, no less than for the future of life on earth. The pope presents humanity's efforts to live harmoniously with nature and pursue social and economic justice as furthering "a spirituality of that global solidarity that flows from the mystery of the Trinity" (LS 240). *Laudato Si'* develops the spiritual dimension of ecology by arguing that the repair of environmental damage requires the conversion of human hearts and minds beyond a narrow framing of self-interest. Pragmatic decisions alone will not ensure the healthy continuation of life on earth.

Conversion is both an ongoing process and a multidimensional one. Its numerous facets include the disposition to "look at ourselves, to acknowledge our deep dissatisfaction and to embark on new paths to authentic freedom" (LS 205). These actions give shape to humanity's "God-given ability to respond to [God's] grace at work deep in our hearts" (LS 205). The pope's analysis of conversion locates it as the doorway to a more authentic human existence. This authenticity requires human participation, but, to anticipate a principal theme of this volume, it also depends on grace.

2. Chapter 4 of *Laudato Si'* develops the notion of "integral ecology."

3. For a fuller discussion of integral ecology, see Daniel Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation: Salvation and Political Ecology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2019), 38–63.

Grace, God's self-bestowal, gives life to humanity and to all of God's creatures. Far from being a "thing" or even quantifiable, grace is the self-expression of the God who is other than "a static, distant, non-interactive God."⁴ As God's self-bestowal, grace is relational: without suppressing the uniqueness of God's creatures, including the complexity and inconsistency of humanity, grace draws respondents into a deeper communion with God and God's creation. A corollary of the relationship with God that grace initiates is the human vocation to safeguard creation through "disinterested concern for others, and the rejection of every form of self-centeredness and self-absorption" (LS 208). Together with "keeping," which involves "caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving" (LS 67), tilling enacts humanity's role as a graced curator of God's graced creation.

The grace of God has "an incarnational tendency," which establishes grace as "not merely the principle of a merely transcendental 'interiority,'" but as what comes "right down into [humanity's] concrete, tangible daily life, where it receives its 'expression' and takes on corporality."⁵ This "corporality" applies to creation, to the gift of God's self-offering in Jesus Christ, and, so this book will stress, to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church. It is "the witness to that divine self-giving in Scripture and tradition [and] in individuals who freely accept in faith this divine offer of salvation," that is an enduring resource for the ecclesial community.⁶

A core principle for this book is that the centrality of grace does not diminish the humanity of the church. As discouraging and disappointing as policies and practices, as well individuals and communities, in the church can be, these realities are not damning evidence of a lack of relationship between grace and the ecclesial community. They are, on the other hand, sure signs of the church's need for tilling, for the conversion that advances greater transparency to grace.

4. Cynthia Rigby, "Knowing Our Limits and Laughing with Joy: Theology in Service to the Church Invisible," in *Theology in Service to the Church: Global and Ecumenical Perspectives*, ed. Alan Hugh Cole (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 107.

5. Karl Rahner, "Personal and Sacramental Piety," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 2, trans. K-H. Kruger (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 119–20.

6. Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 42.

This book applies to the Catholic Church the rationale, imperative, and dynamics of tilling the earth. It locates tilling as an aspect of the integral ecology that applies to the church. The church's self-understanding provides a foundation for this application. More specifically, the image of the church as "the seed and the beginning of [God's] kingdom," a metaphor that the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) employed to describe the ecclesial community, endorses the need for attention to all that might nurture or impede the well-being of the church and its mission.⁷ Hence, the opening to "tilling."

In establishing that the church, like the earth, exists through God's initiative, the image of the "seed" suggests that the ecclesial community can be faithful to its origin only by continuing to grow. This book employs "tilling the church" as a shorthand formula for all that contributes to the church's authenticity and serves its growth. Faithful tilling, which can take shape as innovation, reform, or support for existing expressions of the church's life, serves the future of the ecclesial community.

Preeminent in the process of tilling are the elements that further conversion: learning from both earlier accomplishments and past failures; nourishing present signs of life; and embracing openness to the possibilities likely to emerge in the unknowable future. These actions all express a response to God's call. All are likewise integral to the discipleship that embodies the church's faithfulness in its engagement with the wider world. The elements of conversion make plain that growth for the church implies something other than gaining more members or attracting the acclaim of the wider world.

A thesis flowing through this book is that the faithfulness of the ecclesial community is a graced, free response to grace, to God's continual self-offering. Faithfulness is not an outcome programmed into the DNA of the church's members, such that "choice" and "decision" would be meaningless categories within the church. The interweaving of grace and humanity generates the depths and complexity of the church. The same interweaving both frustrates all efforts at a definitive

7. The Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (LG), Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (1964), 5. Unless otherwise acknowledged, quotations from the council's texts come from Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations; The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).

appraisal of the ecclesial community and subverts every plan to achieve a specific future for the church.

To respond to grace constructively, the community of the church must accept its need for conversion. Conversion moves the ecclesial community away from those aspects of its own life that contradict the God whose call to the church is constant, unchanging, and accessible even in the ceaselessly fluid circumstances of human history. Only through the church's conversion is it possible for grace to permeate and flavor every aspect of ecclesial life, all forms of the church's relationship with God, other people, and the whole of God's creation. Until the fulfillment of God's reign, then, "tilling the church" remains a critical task, a means to unsettle complacency and break open the potential for growth.

As fruitful as the image of tilling the seed of God's kingdom might be, the appropriation to the church of language proper to an agricultural process is not without its dangers, especially if it spirals downwards into a morass of increasingly awkward metaphors related to farming. Alert to that possibility—and anxious to avoid it—this volume employs "tilling" principally as a synonym for the panoply of grace-inspired actions that further the health of the church. Nowhere in its pages, then, will the book suggest that the ecclesial community designate a specific group of its members as "tillers," nor will it nominate a class of ecclesial activities that are expressly classifiable as "tilling." Rather, the book proposes that grace, which permeates the church and the wider world, works for the health of the community's life and witness through a myriad of agents and means, including those bearing no explicitly religious label.

In a way that parallels the embrace of integral ecology by *Laudato Si'*, the book considers "health" for the church as requiring attention to more than any single feature of ecclesial life.⁸ For the church to reflect the trinitarian God who sustains it, ecclesial health requires that all aspects of the church's life exhibit the *perichoresis*, the dance-like connections and interrelationships characteristic of the Trinity.

8. From a different perspective than this volume's, Judith Gruber also identifies ecclesiological applications for *Laudato Si'* in "Ec(o)clesiology: Ecology as Ecclesiology in *Laudato Si'*," *Theological Studies* 78 (2017): 807–24.

The church's mission in the world and the internal ordering of the ecclesial community, then, must interweave and nurture each other in vibrant and creative ways that are responsive to grace. Equally, ill health or dysfunction comes about when the various elements do not coexist harmoniously, when there is a neglect of either an individual component or the balance between them. The church's principal resources—Scripture, sacramental worship and life, the faith and lived spirituality of all the community's members, and the church's ongoing encounter with the wider world—all serve the tilling that grace inspires and reinforces.

A Graced and Human Church

Grace is the vascular system of the church. As such, grace enlivens every aspect of the ecclesial community and orients the church to the fullness of life in Christ. The members of the church can neither instigate nor cancel grace, but are free to accept its call or close themselves to its summons. The fulfilment of God's life-giving grace extends beyond human history, beyond any vulnerability to human rebellion. Within history, however, human action, including its mode as inaction, can shroud the efficacy of grace, a fact that reinforces humanity's need for conversion. The relationship between grace and humanity that is the heart of the church establishes the church as "tillable," as a project in need of actions that mirror the "cultivating, plowing or working" necessary for care for the earth.

As an aid to the church's conversion toward greater transparency to grace, tilling, as noted above, entails attention to the consequences of past failings, engagement with present challenges, and cultivation of grounds for hope in the future in light of the church's orientation toward the fulfilled reign of God. This orientation signals that the church shares in "the ultimate destiny of the universe [that] is in the fullness of God" (LS 83). The conversion of the ecclesial community embodies the graced willingness to be self-critical rather than to assume that the life of the church always aligns perfectly with the prompting of grace.⁹

9. For the importance of the self-critical stance in the life of the church, see Karl Rahner, "The Function of the Church as a Critic of Society," in *Theological Investiga-*



1

The Church as Project

Henry Ford's assembly line disrupted the history of manufacturing. By enabling the high-volume, time-efficient, and cost-effective production of reliable cars, Ford launched a new era in the supply of consumer goods. The assembly line was similarly revolutionary in its impact on human labor. To ensure that his system maintained maximum efficiency, Ford limited workers to the repetition of discrete actions, making it impossible for them to exercise initiative or vary their routines. Ford envisaged personnel in his factories as components of a machine, so he would not allow them "to talk, hum, whistle, sit, lean, pause for reflection, or otherwise behave in a nonrobotic fashion while working, and [they] were given just one thirty-minute break per shift in which to go to the lavatory, have lunch, or attend to any other personal needs."¹ Ironically, then, the assembly line, a monument to humanity's technical and aesthetic imagination, achieved its goals by stifling human freedom and spontaneity.

So intent was Ford on protecting the manufacturing process against the vagaries of human behavior, he insisted that even the pedagogy of the "English School," a facility that his company provided for its employees, should serve this purpose. To satisfy the carmaker's stipulation,

1. Bill Bryson, *One Summer: America, 1927* (New York: Doubleday, 2013), 235.

the school readied recently arrived immigrants to the United States for absorption into Ford's factories, even as it taught them the language and culture of their new homeland. The manifesto for the school highlighted its intent to engineer a new type of worker: "As we adapt the machinery in the shop to turning out the kind of automobile we have in mind, so we have constructed our educational system with a view to producing the human product we have in mind."² The evolution of technology eventually liberated carmaking from any excessive reliance on "the human product." With the advent of real robots, immune to distraction and without "personal needs," Ford's assembly line found its ideal acolytes.

The Catholic Church confounds all that Henry Ford prized. The church might not be chaos writ large, but is far from echoing the hum that efficient machines emit. Accounts of "the Catholic vote" and the profiles of "devout Catholics" that portray the ecclesial community in primarily institutional terms could give the opposite impression. These accounts incline at times toward dated depictions of the church by portraying it as the archetype of a vertically integrated structure, one in which "the faithful" obey without demur all directives from the pope, bishops, and even parish priests. This snapshot bears little resemblance to the reality of contemporary ecclesial life.

Far from being a monolith, the Catholic Church is a body of diverse communities whose individual members fit no single pattern of identification with, or participation in, the ecclesial community. Nor do Catholics generally demonstrate the unquestioning obedience to authority that legend ascribes to their ilk. Indeed, suspicion rather than deference may be the hallmark of currently prevailing attitudes toward the church's officeholders. This suspicion is ascribable in part to contemporary cultural trends unsympathetic to authority and structure. More specifically, and more radically, distrust of the church's ordained ministers is a response to the clerical sexual abuse crisis that has rippled around the world since the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The abuse crisis is the most distressing example of circumstances that can emerge suddenly and with little warning, from within the

2. The manifesto is quoted in Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: Norton, 2018), 384.

church or beyond it, yet be of great moment for the life of the ecclesial community. As catalysts for turmoil and demands for change in the church, these situations testify to the “unfinished” reality of the church.³ They make clear that the church is not the embodiment of the perfection proper to God. Equally, the challenges underscore that the church differs from an object on which neither the circumstances of history nor the actions that span the spectrum of possible human behavior make any impression. The lack of predictability, the need for responsiveness to influences shaping the church’s life in history, and the imperative of conversion on which faithfulness depends, all reveal that the church is tillable, that it is a project requiring attention. These features of the church witness unequivocally to the church’s humanity. Central to this volume is the contention that the same features disclose, albeit indirectly, the church’s relationship to the grace of God.

Since the church “exists wherever ‘the cause of Jesus’ is made present by the Spirit, taken hold of in faith, and put into practice in love, [it] is primarily an event; it is something happening.”⁴ In response to the grace of God who “is indeed the mystery past all grasp,” the church can be what God enables only if it is “an event of human beings giving themselves to God.”⁵ This “event,” a term applicable to an ongoing and dynamic process rather than simply to an individual occurrence with circumscribed boundaries, takes place in history, even as it looks toward the fullness of life in God’s ever-new future. The church’s orientation, because it extends beyond history, ensures that no era in the life of the ecclesial community marks the finality of the church, the end of the ecclesial event.

As an initial step in the process of detailing all that “tilling the church” might imply, this chapter considers what “the church” implies.

3. “Unfinished” as a designation for the church comes from Bernard Prusak, *The Church Unfinished: Ecclesiology Through the Centuries* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2004).

4. Walter Kasper, *An Introduction to Christian Faith*, trans. V. Green (New York: Paulist, 1980), 139; for an analysis of the application of “event” to the life of the church, specifically to the Second Vatican Council, see Joseph Komonchak, “Vatican II as ‘Event,’” in *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?*, ed. David Schultenover (New York: Continuum, 2007), 26–45.

5. Karl Rahner, “Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit,” in *Karl Rahner: Spiritual Writings*, ed. Philip Endean (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 41.

In so doing, it makes the case for characterizing the church as a project that is tillable and in need of tilling. Simply put, the chapter differentiates the church from both a finished product of Ford's assembly line and the invariable assembly process itself. To accomplish its goal, the chapter pursues a three-pronged approach. First, it surveys trends in present-day ecclesiology, trends reflecting the church's unfinished state. Next, the chapter examines how theological reflection on the church as a graced body in history can accentuate the church's dynamism. The final section profiles "mystery," a theological theme applicable primarily to God but derivatively to the open-ended and tillable church.

Locating "the Church"

No theory of human behavior encompasses all possible variables evident in the conduct of human subjects. Similarly, no theological analysis of the church exhausts everything relevant to the ecclesial community. The limitation of each form of inquiry reflects the unfathomable depths of its topic rather than methodological inadequacies. To repeat a claim from the introduction, the interweaving of grace and humanity that constitutes the church generates the breadth and depth that frustrate all efforts to articulate a definitive appraisal of the ecclesial community. The material in this section supports this contention by reviewing contemporary ecclesiologies that showcase the complex reality of the church as a datum of experience more than a theoretical construct.

As a graced and human reality, the church differs from "a Platonic fiction" floating above the world like an eternal "form."⁶ The church's existence in history challenges the complacency evident when the church's officeholders—and perhaps even theologians—concentrate on "questions that nobody asks" rather than acknowledging the truths of the church's present situation.⁷ These truths can be agents for the church's tilling, disturbing for settled practice but likely to be gateways for new possibilities in the life of the ecclesial community.

6. Michael Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death: Ecclesiology in a Post-Modern Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 100.

7. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 155.

Significant issues in the life of the contemporary church provide ample evidence of the impact that the flow of history has on the church. As already noted, the clerical sexual abuse crisis, to begin with the most catastrophic example, has called into question many aspects of ecclesial faith and practice. The harm that criminal actions by abusive priests inflicted on a vast number of minors and vulnerable adults continues to fuel outrage and precipitate large numbers of departures from the Catholic community. Compounding the damage, the failure of many bishops to extend justice and compassion to the survivors of abuse has deepened the scandal and ignited demands for reforms in the church, including in the exercise of episcopal authority.⁸

The fact that male clerics are the principal agents of the abuse has intensified the long-simmering theological discussion—and, more broadly, disillusionment and anger—on many matters that touch on the full and equal participation of women in the church.⁹ Prominent among these matters is the prohibition against the entry of women

8. See the discussion in Massimo Faggioli, “The Catholic Sexual Abuse Crisis as a Theological Crisis: Emerging Issues,” *Theological Studies* 80 (2019): 572–89; Richard Lennan, “Beyond Scandal and Shame?: Ecclesiology and the Longing for a Transformed Church,” *Theological Studies* 80 (2019): 590–610; Richard Lennan, “Un-learning, Learning, and Relearning: Ecclesial Conversion in Response to the Sexual Abuse Crisis,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 29 (2019): 93–107; and Neil Ormerod, “Sexual Abuse, a Royal Commission, and the Australian Church,” *Theological Studies* 80 (2019): 963–65.

9. Representative writings on many issues regarding women in the church include Mary Doak, *A Prophetic Public Church: Witness to Hope Amid the Global Crises of the 21st Century* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2020), 75–115; Susan Ross, “Feminist Theology and the Clergy Sexual Abuse Crisis,” *Theological Studies* 80 (2019): 632–52; Cristina Lledo Gomez, *The Church as Woman and Mother: Historical and Theological Foundations* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2018); Elaine Graham, “Feminist Critiques, Visions, and Models of the Church,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, ed. Paul Avis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 527–51; Tina Beattie, “Transforming Time—The Maternal Church and the Pilgrimage of Faith,” *Ecclesiology* 12 (2016): 54–72; Ninna Edgardh, “(De)gendering Ecclesiology: Reflections on the Church as a Gendered Body,” in *Ecclesiology in the Trenches: Theory and Method under Construction*, ed. Sune Fahlgren and Jonas Idestrom (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), 193–207; Mary Ann Hinsdale, “A Feminist Reflection on Postconciliar Catholic Ecclesiology,” in *A Church with Open Doors*, ed. Richard Gaillardetz and Edward Hahnenberg (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2015), 112–37.

into those ecclesial ministries for which ordination is a requirement. Frustration with existing policies that affect women in the church underscores in two ways the symbiosis between grace and human history. First, the realization that many groups in society have dismantled long-standing barriers to the full participation of women in roles once the exclusive preserve of men offers a model for those desiring similar changes in the Catholic Church. Second, convictions on the equality of the baptized in the ecclesial community, convictions with a basis in the New Testament (Gal 3:28), fuel the belief that pressures for changes in the church are not merely social protests, but the work of grace: “Women with deep gladness are responding to a call from the Holy Spirit of God, heard in the depths of their hearts, to take the giftedness of their ‘one wild and precious life’ and meet the world’s deep hunger for meaning and healing, liberation and redemption.”¹⁰

The way ahead on issues affecting the ongoing engagement of women with the church’s structures and ministries may be unclear, but the fact that the questions and the demands for change persist amplifies the church’s status as an unfinished project. This status likewise makes evident that theological reflection on the ecclesial community must be ongoing. In light of all that the tumultuous early decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed, it is scarcely imaginable that contemporary ecclesiology could proceed as if the church were straightforward, flawless, or static. Such was not always the case for theologies of the church.

Ecclesiology in the not-too-distant past resided in Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and various Protestant denominational settings that collectively practiced mutual exclusion, while exhibiting little doubt that their own tradition was the apotheosis of all things ecclesial.¹¹ Symptomatic of the persistent divisions within the one Christian Church, each sectarian ecclesiology sought to bolster the legitimacy of its host by contrasting its own tradition with other, necessarily lesser,

10. Elizabeth Johnson, “‘Your one wild and precious life’: Women on the Road to Ministry,” *Theological Studies*, 80 (2019): 203.

11. For the history and development of a range of denominational ecclesiologies, see the chapters in part 2 of *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, ed. Paul Avis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 183–357.

ecclesial embodiments. The tradition-specific ecclesiologies directed their attention primarily to the internal concerns of their sponsoring body, often elevating those concerns above engagement with the church's mission in the wider world.

Today—happily—most ecclesiologies, including those that concentrate on a single ecclesial tradition, as this work does in discussing the Catholic Church, recognize that the many bodies within the one Christian Church share a common pool of resources and a common mission, both of which have their source in God's self-revelation in history, from which ecclesial faith springs. It is certainly true that different communities, even now, weave these common elements into formulations of "the church" that do not necessarily promote closer relationships with other communities. Nonetheless, dialogue, a theme that will be prominent in a number of places throughout this book, has largely eliminated both the mutual anathemas and extreme vituperation that scarred previous eras of ecclesial life. Steps toward enduring reconciliation and expanded possibilities for shared mission now appear where once hostility reigned. The new age of dialogue has enabled deeper appreciation of commonalities between Christian communities. It has likewise facilitated new approaches to the contentious issues inherited from earlier periods, issues that remain obstacles to full communion between the churches.¹²

A less congenial stimulus for efforts at reconciliation between the churches has come from the marginalization of ecclesial faith in pluralist societies. Neither depth of history nor the assertion of uniqueness is enough to spare any individual church, the Catholic Church included, from the diminution that has increasingly become their shared lot. This situation makes plain that prioritizing past divisions over present opportunities and challenges endangers the church's mission in the contemporary world, whose religious landscape is no longer identical with that of the sixteenth century.¹³

12. For an overview of contemporary ecumenical theology, see Gesa Elsbeth Thiesen, ed., *Ecumenical Ecclesiology: Unity, Diversity and Otherness in a Fragmented World* (London: T. and T. Clark, 2009).

13. On this point, see Richard Lennan, "Truth, Context, and Unity: Karl Rahner's Ecumenical Theology," *Philosophy and Theology*, 27 (2015): 497–512.

The Catholic Church, especially as a result of the Second Vatican Council, has been active in helping to craft a new ecumenical landscape, one better able to reflect the realities of the twenty-first century.¹⁴ Present-day Catholics are likely to affirm the wisdom of Christian traditions other than their own, and to accept these traditions as a gift that enhances the whole church. In this vein, current ecumenical engagement, even as it grapples with the legacy of church-dividing controversies and struggles to translate theological agreement into everyday practice, directs attention to what the churches can receive from, and offer to, each other for the sake of the fundamental unity of the one church of Jesus Christ.¹⁵

Just as the years since Vatican II have altered the ecumenical landscape, the same period has witnessed significant shifts in the ecclesial self-understanding of Catholics, shifts that owe much to the council's stimulus. The council's teaching on the church, with which later chapters will engage more amply, offered alternatives to a theology of the church as "perfect society," the imaginary that dominated the ecclesial worldview of Catholics between the Council of Trent (1545–63) and Vatican II, as the final section of this chapter will illustrate.

A frequent companion of the emphasis on the church as a perfect society was the stress on the church in Europe as the lynchpin of ecclesial life. The Eurocentric emphasis relegated Catholics in other parts of the world to being little more than recipients of what emanated from a centralized "export firm," which dispatched "to the whole world a European religion along with other elements of this supposedly superior civilization and culture."¹⁶ In the era of the "export firm," Catholic communities were often more attentive to Rome than to their local social, economic, religious, and political settings. These circumstances

14. For a detailed analysis of Vatican II's ecumenical theology, see Ormond Rush, *The Vision of Vatican II: Its Fundamental Principles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019), 371–424.

15. See Paul Murray, "Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning: Establishing the Agenda," in Paul Murray, ed., *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5–25.

16. Karl Rahner, "Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 20, trans. E. Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 78.

nurtured the belief—psychologically compelling, but reflecting reality only partially, at best—that Catholic communities around the world resembled each other in every detail, as well as being able to rely unreservedly on authoritative structures that guaranteed stability.

The hegemony of a European model reflected, and buttressed, a narrow interpretation of Catholic life. This interpretation understood unity in the church as requiring communities in every place to practice an identical approach to worship, structure, and all else that expresses the church in the world. Conversely, the current challenge is to preserve a commitment to “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph 4:5) that maintains unity but does not require uniformity in all aspects of the church’s life, either between the many churches that claim the title of “Christian” or within the Catholic Church itself.

The contemporary church’s engagement with the tsunami that is the multi-faith, digital, and globalized world—phenomena unimaginable in previous decades—has generated challenges that Christian communities, individually or collectively, have not previously confronted.¹⁷ The dramatic interference to “normal” life that the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated in 2020 and beyond has affected even the practice of the church’s worship, and so demonstrated that no dimension of ecclesial life is exempt from the world’s fluidity.¹⁸ Consequently, attention to the church’s historical and cultural setting has become a guiding principle for much contemporary ecclesiology: “If distinctively theological notions must govern any adequate ecclesiology, exclusive attention to them tends to abstract the Church out of history and out of those quite particular realizations that are the individual churches assembled

17. Daniella Zsupan-Jerome, *Connected toward Communion: The Church and Social Communication in the Digital Age* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014) examines the impact that the evolution of digital technology has on the church; see also Anthony Godzieba, “*Quaestio Disputata*: The Magisterium in an Age of Digital Reproduction,” in *When the Magisterium Intervenes: The Magisterium and Theologians in Today’s Church*, ed. Richard Gaillardetz (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 140–53. For a discussion of how ecclesiology might respond to the challenges of globalization, see Vincent Miller, “Where Is the Church? Globalization and Catholicity,” *Theological Studies* 69 (2008): 412–32.

18. See, for example, Kevin Irwin, *Liturgy and Sacraments in a COVID World: Renewal, Not Restoration* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2021).

locally, that is, in particular times, places, and cultures, with distinctive historical tasks to undertake.¹⁹

This principle highlights the identity of theology, including ecclesiology, as a “situated” activity, one that requires practitioners to take account of the circumstances in which human beings encounter God.²⁰ The circumstances of time and place influence the ways in which humanity experiences God, but they also have an impact on reflection on that experience. From this perspective, ecclesiology is a contextual theology: it necessarily takes place somewhere at some time. Ecclesiology, then, must be alert to the topography of those particular times and places, no less than to their effects on the people who form the ecclesial community.

Contemporary Trends in Ecclesiology

The consolidation of ecclesiology as a contextual theology has facilitated the emergence of the human and social sciences as influences on thinking about the church.²¹ Building on the recognition of grace as embodied and historical, theological reflection on the church can draw fruitfully from the insights of those disciplines whose bailiwick is human behavior. These disciplines help to identify and evaluate the dynamics of the ecclesial community as a human reality. The insights of these nontheological disciplines aid, too, in the identification of deficits that either militate against the healthy practice of shared ecclesial life or impede the effectiveness of the church’s mission in the world. Lessons from sociology can be sources of insight into, for example, how the church’s structures function—or become dysfunctional—and how ecclesial communities might navigate change without descending into internecine conflicts.

The sociological trend in ecclesiology that has brought demography and ethnography to the fore has altered the measure of authenticity

19. Joseph Komonchak, “The Epistemology of Reception,” *The Jurist* 57 (1997): 187.

20. Dan Stiver, “Theological Method,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 179.

21. For discussion of the background and dynamics of the use of social scientific methodologies in ecclesiology, see Neil Ormerod, “Social Sciences and the Ideological Critiques of Ecclesiology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, ed. Paul Avis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 535–72; see also Ormerod’s “*Sensus fidei* and Sociology: How Do We Find the Normative in the Empirical?,” in *Learning from All the Faithful: A Contemporary Theology of the Sensus Fidei*, ed. Bradford Hinze and Peter Phan (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016), 89–102.

for all descriptions of the ecclesial community. Today, it is important that such descriptions locate their subject in relation to the needs, desires, and struggles characteristic of specific groups and locations, rather than as timeless, transcendent, and universally applicable.²² Such developments have honed sensitivities around references to “the church.” Absent this awareness, professions about the church might resemble “ideas disconnected from realities,” the sort of ideas that “give rise to ineffectual forms of idealism and nominalism, capable at most of classifying and defining, but certainly not calling to action” (EG 232). In relation to the themes of this volume, such “disconnected” approaches to the church would be irreconcilable with the need for self-criticism, revision of priorities, and openness to new questions that “tilling” promotes and encapsulates.

As part of ensuring that ecclesiology is not abstract, present-day approaches reclaim the voice of groups, including communities of color, people living with disabilities, and the victims of unjust economic and political systems, especially refugees and migrants, long dwelling on the margins of the Christian community’s attention and priorities.²³ Notably, the exclusive focus on European experience as the universal norm

22. See, for example, Paul Avis, “Ecclesiology and Ethnography: An Unresolved Relationship,” *Ecclesiology* 14 (2018): 322–37; Paul Lakeland, “Ecclesiology and the Use of Demography: Three Models of Apostolicity,” in *A Church with Open Doors*, ed. Richard Gaillardetz and Edward Hahnenberg (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2015), 23–42; Pete Ward, ed., *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012). *Ecclesial Practice*, a journal that began publishing in 2014, is dedicated entirely to exploring the use of ethnography in studies of the church.

23. Illustrations of ecclesiology done from the perspective of the marginalized include M. Shawn Copeland, ed., *Uncommon Witness: The Black Catholic Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009); Gemma Tulud Cruz, “A New Way of Being Christian: The Contribution of Migrants to the Church,” in *Contemporary Issues of Migration and Theology*, ed. Elaine Padilla and Peter Phan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 95–120; Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Church of the Poor, Historical Sacrament of Liberation,” *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 543–64; Mary Carlson, “Making the Invisible Visible: Inviting Persons with Disabilities into the Life of the Church,” *Horizons* 45 (2018): 46–73; Natalia Imperatori-Lee, *Cuéntame: Narrative in the Ecclesial Present* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018), 134–58; and Agnes Brazal, “Church as Sacrament of Yin-Yang Harmony: Toward a More Incisive Participation of Laity and Women in the Church,” *Theological Studies* 80 (2018): 414–35.

for the church has receded as ecclesiological insights from around the globe have become more prominent.²⁴ This development, reflective of the emergence of the “world-Church” at Vatican II, has at least made it more possible to imagine the Catholic Church as a body characterized by “all its parts exercising a reciprocal influence on one another.”²⁵ The activities representative of tilling, so this book contends, are essential for this possibility to move from imagination to realization.

Attention to diverse voices contributes to the richness of the church’s life. In addition, this attention facilitates the recognition that the Holy Spirit’s activity extends beyond the “middle-class, middle-aged, relatively educated, articulate, skilled, if not professional, and, in general, given to a fairly responsible level of participation in the world of business, work and social life.”²⁶ In so doing, theological reflection on the church can echo Pope Francis’s conviction that “the poor,” a term he understands as “primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one” (EG 198), can “evangelize” the rest of the church through the witness of lives lived in hope built on trust in God rather than possessions or personal accomplishments. This emphasis makes clear the distinction between the gospel message and societal norms for success and purpose.

The endorsement of attentiveness to the church’s diversity and cultural context as a theological source is not a concession to the *Zeitgeist* of postmodernity or to contemporary trends in “identity politics.” In fact, it reflects the New Testament, where “the church” is interchangeable with “the churches” (Acts 15:41; 1 Cor 7:17; and 1 Thess 2:14).²⁷

24. Examples of ecclesiologies emerging from contexts previously overshadowed by European dominance include Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator, ed., *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016); Simon C. Kim, *A World Church in Our Backyard: How the Spirit Moved Church and Society* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2016).

25. Rahner, “Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council,” 78.

26. John O’Brien, “The Authority of the Poor,” in *Authority in the Roman Catholic Church: Theory and Practice*, ed. Bernard Hoose (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 217–30.

27. For a brief overview of the New Testament’s usage of “the church” and “the churches,” see Michael Fahey, “Church” in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, 2nd ed., ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John Galvin (Minneapolis:

The willingness to be attentive to the spectrum of voices in the church can be an expression of faith, an acknowledgment that “as the flesh of the church is the flesh of Christ in every age, the flesh of the church is marked (as was his flesh) by race, sex, gender, sexuality, and culture.”²⁸ The same willingness is essential if the church is to show itself in the world as other than a body “shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security” (EG 49).

The fact that the church is not identical in every time and place differentiates the ecclesial community from the processes of an assembly line. The same fact identifies ecclesiology as “an aspirational undertaking,” one that is proper to a people “trying to build that ideal community of justice and righteousness which Christians refer to as the Kingdom of God.”²⁹ Different generations of believers, and even synchronous ecclesial communities, address this task in unique ways, ways peculiar to their own context and interpretations of their mission.

Diversity within the one ecclesial community highlights that “what Church is, unfolds in and through the drama of salvation mediated in the lives of engaged individuals and communities,” rather than being “found all packaged as it were, within a doctrinal system.”³⁰ To anticipate an aspect of a later chapter, this emphasis does not mandate the rejection of ecclesial tradition, but rather drives the effort, itself a form of tilling, to appropriate the tradition creatively in circumstances different from its origin. The circumstances might differ, but every generation in the church shares with every other one the gift of the same Holy Spirit.

The existence of the church as a community of different voices, as well as the lack of predictability in the church’s own life and its

Fortress, 2011), 328–31; for more detailed studies of particular churches, see Raymond Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist, 1984), and Frederick Cwiekowski, *The Church: Theology in History* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018).

28. M. Shawn Copeland, “Marking the Body of Jesus, the Body of Christ,” in *The Strength of Her Witness: Jesus Christ in the Global Voices of Women*, ed. Elizabeth Johnson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016), 280.

29. Gerard Mannion, “Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: A New Paradigm for the Roman Catholic Church?,” *New Blackfriars* 85 (2004): 305.

30. John O’Brien, “Ecclesiology as Narrative,” *Ecclesiology* 4 (2008): 151.

participation in the world, are formative factors for ecclesiology. They indicate how important it is that theological analyses of “the church” are able to hold together both the diversity and unity of the Christian community, an outcome that is at least conceivable since both qualities reflect the presence of grace. No less crucially, the same factors argue convincingly against the existence of a “blueprint” at the disposal of the church.

A blueprint would create the impression that there is a “single right way to think about the church,” a way applicable to every situation in every era, regardless of the circumstances of time, place, and people.³¹ Without a blueprint, theological reflection on the church must respond to the embodiments of the Christian community in its manifold contexts: “Critical theological analysis of those contexts, and the present shape and activity of the church within them, should therefore be one of the central tasks of ecclesiology.”³² To depict the reality of its subject accurately, then, a portrait of the church must do justice to the ways in which members of the church live their faith, rather than impose a theological superstructure that detaches them from any historical and social context.

Since the church does not have a blueprint guiding it through the uncertainties of history, Nicholas Healy insists that the ecclesial community must be willing to learn from the wisdom of “social psychology, organizational and network theories, phenomenology, leadership and educational theories.”³³ As mentioned above, these sources of insight into human behavior can inform and expand the church’s self-

31. Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 38. Healy develops his thesis concerning the blueprint in a number of other publications, which include “Ordinary Theology, Theological Method and Constructive Ecclesiology,” in *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*, ed. Jeff Astley and Leslie Francis (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 13–21, and “Ecclesiology, Ethnography, and God: An Interplay of Reality Descriptions,” in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 182–99.

32. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 39.

33. Nicholas M. Healy, “Ecclesiology and Practical Theology,” in *Keeping Faith in Practice: Aspects of Catholic Pastoral Theology*, ed. James Sweeney et al. (London: SCM, 2010), 117.

understanding, including the way it might frame and enact its mission in various contexts. If theology perceives the church as transcending history by following a design that could claim Jesus himself as its architect, it is likely to neglect the contributions that human wisdom, which is itself graced, might make to the church's realization in history.

A church that locates its identity in isolation from history leaves little room for the articulation of "rich, critically informed descriptions of church life that point to areas for improvement—better leadership, more appropriate practices, more engaged and fruitful internal social dynamics, greater openness to other churches or the surrounding society, or growth in membership."³⁴ A blueprint would inoculate the community against any obligation to question whether or not its self-understanding and forms of presence in the world were authentic appropriations of what the Spirit enables. Equally, a blueprint would likewise render irrelevant the ambiguities and failures of the church's own history, as well as the need for critical reflection on "the praxis of the church [and] the history of ecclesiology itself and the ways they have shaped that praxis."³⁵ In terms central to this book, the blueprint would obscure the unfinished state of the church, and so obviate any need for tilling.

The desire to separate reflection on the church from any hint of an ecclesial blueprint can extend to a disinclination to use metaphors in the work of ecclesiology. Here, so the critique runs, the concern is that metaphors for the church tend to reduce boundless complexity to a single, often simple image, while also being "too idealistic, disconnected from the church we actually experience, providing widely diverging views of what the church 'should' look like."³⁶ It is certainly true that uncritical appropriation of "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Pet 2:9), to say nothing of "perfect society," could convey both flawlessness and completeness, qualities not easily reconcilable with a church that is to walk "by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor 5:7).

34. *Ibid.*, 117.

35. Neil Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church: An Experiment in Systematic-Historical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 5.

36. Brian Flanagan, "The Limits of Ecclesial Metaphors in Systematic Theology," *Horizons* 35 (2008): 47.

Metaphors, on the other hand, can give a focus to particular aspects of the church. They can do so without erasing the church's complexity or status as a project, and without implying that the church is immune to the impact of history, including its own history. As ecclesial communities in multiple contexts confront their own limitations and failures; as they engage in the messy, often angst-ridden, processes of discerning, dialogue, and decision-making; and as they seek to articulate a faithful response to the Holy Spirit when new questions arise, metaphors for the church can play a positive role. Without imposing a "one-size-fits-all" approach that prevents local adaptations, metaphors can help communities to articulate their goals, while also being a stimulus for them to inquire into their own reception of the gospel, and representation of it. With the aim of indicating how metaphors can be helpful, this volume will make use of "mystery," "sacrament," and "pilgrim," all common metaphors for analysis of the church that feature in the documents of Vatican II.

If members of the church—to say nothing of theologians—did not need to grapple with how best to embody faithfulness to grace, they could dwell untroubled in "transcendental contentment," enjoying the serenity reflective of immunity to the uncertainties of history and the flux of societies.³⁷ From a different but no less significant standpoint, a community of believers exempt from the need for decision-making would never experience the excitement inherent in that activity. The joy that can be manifest in decision-making reflects the grace that facilitates an ongoing conversion to deeper faithfulness to Christ and the Spirit—"it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). The same grace promotes the ongoing commitment to mission, even when missionary endeavors are "unsuccessful," at least by standards that Henry Ford would be likely to endorse.

The current approaches in ecclesiology are consistent with the identification of the church as a tillable body, an unfinished project. Both the developments in perceptions of the church and the range of cultural influences that the ecclesial community must navigate suggest that the unity of the church's faith, the vitality of its worship, and the fruitful-

37. Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History: Ecclesial Existence*, vol. 3 (New York: Continuum, 2008), 35.

ness of its service in the world are themselves ongoing tasks, rather than “one-and-done” activities. Since no element of the church’s life and mission is set in concrete, impervious to questions, doubts, and possibilities, theological reflection on the church can do justice to its subject only by being itself an open-ended exercise.

As this review of contemporary ecclesiology concludes, it is important to acknowledge that this volume is not a study of a specific group in the church that exists in a particular social setting. Yet, as mentioned in the introduction, the book is alert to cultural context and sensitive to the danger of the divorce between ecclesiology and the flow of history. As necessary as this sensitivity is, the next section of this chapter will argue that doing justice to the uniqueness of the church requires attention not only to the contextual experiences of the human community—the “horizontal” reality of the church—but also to God’s activity—the “vertical” reality of the church—and, most critically, to the interweaving of the two dimensions. The ambit and approach of theological reflection on the church must seek to be faithful to both, and to the relationship between them, a relationship that, reflecting the incarnational tendency of grace, is itself inseparable from life in the world.

Theology and the Tillable Church

The diversity of ecclesial communities within the contemporary Catholic Church and the general sociological turn in ecclesiology are forms of tilling that expose the church’s humanity. These developments remind members of the church that they do not possess a blueprint providing untroubled passage through turbulent times. Such reminders reinforce the grounding of the church in history and culture. Nevertheless, the project that is the church is not one that sociological categories alone can guide, and certainly not determine. The ecclesial community’s profession of faith proclaims the church to be a work of grace, of God’s relationship to humanity in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Theological reflection on the church, if it is to be adequate to this dimensions of its subject, must maintain a focus on God’s action, no less than human action. Most importantly, theology must maintain its alertness to the inextricable link between the two.



6

The Art of Faithfulness

Art engages with life's breadth and depth. As "a product of that human transcendental by which, as spiritual and free beings, we strive for the totality of all reality," art gives imaginative expression to what eludes humanity's definitive grasp.¹ Through creativity in music and literature, as well as human movement and various visual media, artists resist resignation to the seeming randomness of the events that punctuate history. The work of artists embodies quintessentially human qualities that include an appreciation of beauty and a sensitivity to suffering. Art also reflects humanity's quest for hope amid all that enchants, baffles, and at times overwhelms everyday life. Whether striving to express joy or protesting against injustice, artists testify to the human project of meaning-making that arises in the present but looks to the future. Interpreted theologically, these characteristics of art identify it as a graced expression of transcendence, and so as a response to humanity's encounter with the mystery of God.²

1. Karl Rahner, "Art Against the Horizon of Theology and Piety," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 23, trans. J. Donceel and H. Riley (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 165.

2. David Tracy argues that if art rejects transcendence, it can become "ersatz religion"; see David Tracy, "A Correlational Model of Practical Theology Revisited," in

F. Scott Fitzgerald depicts the art of the novelist in terms indicative of humanity's capacity for transcendence. Fitzgerald identifies the motive for writing as the effort to gain perspective on experiences that are "so great and moving that it doesn't seem at the time that anyone else has been so caught up and so pounded and dazzled and astonished and beaten and broken and rescued and illuminated and rewarded and humbled in just that way ever before."³ Since these experiences exceed the existing instruments of meaning-making, they call for a response that is creative enough to match the magnitude of the stimulus. The novelist writes not to reduce what has occurred to something more manageable, but in the hope of gaining insight into extraordinary experiences by sharing them and their effects with readers.

The grappling with experience that Fitzgerald describes contrasts with efforts to "solve" life's complexity, whether through privileging the quantifiable above all else or, more radically, seeking to corral the uncontrollable within the limits of a single worldview. Rather than remove from life all that is unwieldy, art, as David Tracy contends, "encounters me with the surprise, impact, even the shock of reality itself. In experiencing art, I recognize a truth I somehow know but I know that I did not really know except through the recognition of the essential compelled by the work of art."⁴ In this way, art challenges the temptation to domesticate or conceal those aspects of life that remain stubbornly resistant to neatness and the familiar.

Nor is art itself one-dimensional. Within any genre of art there are shared elements—all writers, for instance, use words—but each genre is also home to what can seem to be an infinite variety of styles—Charlotte Brontë, Toni Morrison, and F. Scott Fitzgerald himself, are all cherished writers but their works are not interchangeable. This diversity reflects the talent and imagination unique to each artist, but also the individual backgrounds of artists, and the cultural and historical settings that form the context for their artistic undertakings.

Invitation to Practical Theology: Catholic Voices and Visions, ed. Claire Wolfteich (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2014), 84.

3. F. Scott Fitzgerald quoted in *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald: A New Collection*, ed. Matthew Bruccoli (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 13.

4. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (London: SCM, 1981), 111–12.

Art has flourished in hostile environments, but freedom is significant for the flowering of the human imagination. Mandates directing artists to conform to an officially sanctioned ideology usually result in uninspiring products that give little evidence of the beauty revelatory of the human capacity for transcendence.⁵ Equally, an assembly line approach to manufacturing art is unlikely to result in stirring works.

Creativity in art owes much to the “stuff” of art itself: the words, music, and other “ingredients” proper to the manifold forms of art are malleable rather than fixed, so they invite and enable imaginative engagement. The meeting of human imagination, historical circumstances, and the raw materials at the disposal of artists does not result in mere repetition of what already exists. As the history of multiple forms of art attests, the whole artistic endeavor is an area rich with possibilities for innovation.

As crucial as is the link between art and creativity, not all innovations find ready acceptance into the artistic canon. The rejection of certain offerings reflects the judgment that a particular work is simply not art. This judgment can be a response to “the shock of the new,” the unease that is a common reaction to a confrontation with unorthodox styles and objects, ones that do not tally with the prevailing norms.⁶ At a deeper level, denying legitimacy to certain approaches gives voice to the conviction that art has boundaries, boundaries that permit no transgressions. This assessment aligns with the way in which the application of “God-given” to an element of the church’s life often identifies it as beyond the possibility of change.

Boundaries can be a mixed blessing. For artists, there is always a danger that the space inside the lines is too narrow or constrained to be compatible with the freedom to experiment that feeds the liveliness of

5. Proof for this claim abounds in the variety of art produced at the direction of both fascist and communist dictators in the twentieth century; see, for example, Michael Kater, *The Twisted Muse: Musicians and Their Music in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), and Igor Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People’s Republic of China* (New York: Icon, 1990).

6. The Australian art critic Robert Hughes uses this term as part of his description of the reception, and non-reception, of modern art; see his *The Shock of the New: The Hundred-Year History of Modern Art—Its Rise, Its Dazzling Achievements, Its Fall*, rev. ed. (New York: Knopf, 1991).

art. This rigidity implies that the best of all art resides in past achievements rather than in possible futures. More fruitful are those boundaries that are flexible enough to support rather than inhibit creativity. Such borders are sympathetic to the history of art as a history of variety and change. Boundaries that help to distinguish good art from its pretenders embody the wisdom from the past, while being able to accommodate the present and future. This wisdom is other than the product of either laws or actuarial calculations: it is the inheritance of an affinity with art, an affinity that expresses the same imagination and insight at work in the creation of art.

This chapter applies an appreciation of artistry to the life of the pilgrim church, especially to its decision-making in matters of faith and practice. In so doing, this chapter builds on chapter 5's argument that the Spirit-formed capacity of the church's inherited faith fuels the eschatological orientation of the ecclesial community. Viewed through this lens, even "God-given" is not an absolute barrier to movement. The present chapter explores a particular task that the pilgrim church confronts regularly: the need to determine the right relationship between the old and the new, the relationship that does justice to both preservation and innovation by enabling faithful continuity in the midst of change.

The thesis of this chapter is that the faithfulness of the church, especially in decisions about change, is more a matter of graced creativity than of adherence to precedent, obedience to authority, or submission to "popular opinion" within the ecclesial community. At the same time, faithful artistry in the church differs from a disregard of precedent, disdain for authority, or rejection of the graced experiences and insights of members of the church, for which "popular opinion"—or, more accurately, as a later section of the chapter will discuss, *sensus fidei*—can act as a synonym. This paradox illuminates ecclesial artistry as a response to the Holy Spirit, who as "life, movement, color, radiance, restorative stillness in the din" initiates and supports creativity in the church.⁷

7. Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 129.

Tilling as Art

The analogy to art highlights that appropriate tilling of the church differs from the application of a theoretical construct drawn from general principles, including theological ones. Still, the focus on artistry does not negate the important role of theological reflection in the church. Without this reflection, the embrace or rejection of change could only ever be a spontaneous affection, one likely to go in either direction on any given day. By illuminating the relationship between revelation, the dynamics of grace in history, and the possibilities for the authentic transmission of faith, theology contributes to the ecclesial community's determination of how to receive the tradition faithfully, respond to present needs, and support the church's orientation to the future.

If theology cannot prescribe the most appropriate way for the community to respond to a particular challenge, it can clarify a framework for such decisions. The framework that this chapter will present is duly attentive to the church's living tradition of faith, but also to its ongoing need for conversion and its engagement with the graced world. Those elements are a dimension of the unfinished reality of the church, which includes, too, the complex and fluid relationships within the one community of faith, a community whose authenticity is inseparable from remaining open to the fulfillment of God's reign.

Theology can also indicate the criteria that have guided authentic change throughout Christian history. These criteria are not exotic or obscure, but constellate around service to the church's mission and communion, both of which are necessary for the ecclesial community's faithfulness in its relationship to God. Theology and the church's history affirm the legitimacy of change as at least a possibility for the church, the difficulties and anxieties that accompany specific changes notwithstanding. Acknowledgment of this possibility is unlikely to eliminate future arm wrestling over individual proposals for changes, but does suggest that the willingness to grapple with those proposals can itself be an expression of faith in the Holy Spirit's presence to the church.

Without a formula for change that is able to guarantee the rightness of its conclusions, change is inevitably an ill-defined process in the life of ecclesial communities. The life of the ecclesial community, then, is not a series of seamless transitions from one well-ordered

state to another. Indeed, the church's history would confirm Ladislav Orsy's opinion that "change has always caused problems in the Church; it still does."⁸ Orsy's sobering appraisal, especially its use of "always," makes plain that problems associated with determining the faithfulness of the church are not unique either to any particular period of ecclesiastical history or to any single aspect of ecclesial life. Faithful change, in short, is messy.

Authentic change in the church, consistent with all that "tilling" suggests, preserves rather than fractures the continuity of the church's faith, addresses present deficits in the realization of the church's mission and communion, and maintains the church's orientation to God's ever-new future. The many strands of that task suffice to endorse Karl Rahner's view that maintaining continuity and identity amid change in the church, far from being a matter of calculation, is "an object of believing hope and of that faithfulness which dares to commit itself on the basis of hope."⁹ In light of the magnitude of the challenge, it is scarcely surprising that the Christian community experiences a major measure of angst as it makes choices, especially when it is impossible to anticipate every consequence of all decisions.

The lack of precision in matters touching on faithful change in the church reflects the complexity endemic to human interactions with the grace of the Holy Spirit. It reflects, too, the particularity of the historical settings in which the ecclesial community makes its decisions about change. Assessed positively, the lack of precision is less a matter of regret than yet another witness to the freedom that grace confers on the church. The forms of tilling that aid the mission of the church express this graced freedom in ways that have an affinity with all that gives the church its specificity.

The affinity with art that empowers judgments about "good" and "poor" art, no less than the affinity with all that gives the church its specificity, resonates with John Henry Newman's argument for the "il-

8. Ladislav Orsy, *The Evolving Church and the Sacrament of Penance* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1978), 12.

9. Karl Rahner, "Basic Observations on the Subject of the Changeable and Unchangeable Factors in the Church," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14, trans. D. Bourke (New York: Seabury, 1976), 7.

lative sense.” As Newman explains it, the illative sense enables human beings to have “certitude” about their beliefs. He emphasizes that certitude “is not a passive impression made upon the mind from without, by argumentative compulsion, but in all concrete questions it is an active recognition of propositions as true.”¹⁰ Certitude, then, involves the knower, not simply what is known; it is personal without being idiosyncratic.

The illative sense involves a being-at-one-with the particular theme that is the subject of belief. Newman proposes that it is possible for people to be certain about their judgments and the accuracy of their conclusions on the basis of “a sort of instinct or inspiration, not an obedience to external rules of criticism or of science.”¹¹ This instinct takes arguments into account, but is more than the conclusion of a logical process: it “determines what science cannot determine, the limits of converging probabilities and the reasons sufficient for a proof.”¹² Consistent with being a human reality, the instinct itself is not static but develops over a lifetime of practice.

The being-at-one-with that is critical for the illative sense applies, Newman suggests, to expertise in enterprises as diverse as ship-building, gymnastics, and singing.¹³ It applies, too, to matters of faith. In relation to faith in God, the trustworthiness of the illative sense does not derive from philosophical or theological expertise, but from “due devotion” to God.¹⁴ The latter refines decision-making through the discipline of a life attentive to the movement of grace. Certainty, then, is the product of faith as much as it is a measure of faith. As such, the certainty of faith requires an ongoing conversion to grace, a theme that has been a major emphasis of this volume. This requirement distinguishes faith from self-assertion and from efforts to conform God to the convictions of individuals and groups.

10. John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870; repr., Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 271.

11. *Ibid.*, 280.

12. *Ibid.*, 282.

13. *Ibid.*, 280.

14. *Ibid.*, 276.

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