

## Class 4: Church as Communion of Small Communities

### Class Goals

Grasp the nature of the Church as a communion of faith and love

Realize that this communion of love flows from the life of the Trinity (unified diversity)

Identify the kinds of covenants (promises) that created God's people in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures --the Old and New Testament

Shift from identifying the "church" with the institution to identifying the "church" with the pilgrim people of God, organized in small communities--that's us!

Identify the Documents of Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* on the nature of the church, and *Gaudium et Spes* on mission of the church

Explain the meaning of "the universal call to holiness" from Vatican II

Explain "the mission of Jesus Christ has a church."

Relate Paul's image of the church as the body of Christ to us today, to history and end times

### Overview:

Many people think of the Vatican, Pope, bishops, and priests - the clergy and institution -- "as THE Church," rather than the community of the baptized. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) grappled with the Church's self-definition in the modern world and defines itself as a "community, or better, a communion." Avery Dulles writes about a variety of expressions of being church (*eklesia*) (see *Models of the Church*). The objective of this course is to help the student make this shift toward "Church as communion." Compare the notion of *church* in Mt. 16.16-20 with Mt. 18.15-20. The Church is a *sacrament* of Christ's presence in the world **to the extent** it lives out the mission of Jesus in proclaiming the reign of God.

### Introduction:

Through much of church history, until the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) the Church was seen primarily as an "institution", a model of hierarchy: Pope, bishops, and priests (the diaconate was established after the Council). The laity were mere "recipients" of the "graces" that dribbled down from the institution. This model changed dramatically with Vatican II. The institution is no longer the PRIMARY understanding of what it means to be Church. The primary understanding is the Church as the People of God (LG, Chapter 2). This is a major shift and it brought an end to clericalism and the end of the era of Constantine (313 CE). Some examples: In Eucharist all are called to "full, conscious, active participation" (SC, 14). The Council proclaimed a universal call to holiness that applies to all, not a select group. The laity share fully and directly in the life and mission of the Church by reason of baptism and confirmation, and not by a bishop's appointment (LG 33).

The Vatican II vision of Church is one of COMMUNION. As such, the elements of dialogue, openness, listening are integral to a spirituality of communion. The Church applies these elements to itself as well as to its engagement with the world, not to avoid the world (and its secularism), but to enter into a dialogue from which all parties can learn and grow together. Paul VI's document *Ecclesiam Suam* is a magnificent document on dialogue in modern times (see [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)). *Lumen gentium* emphasizes the "Church interior" (ad intra) and *Gaudium et spes* deals with the "Church to the world" (ad extra).

### Resources:

Vatican II. *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*. (access at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)).

Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* (access at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)).

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Richard McBrien, *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism*. NY: HarperCollins Pub., 2008.

John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II?* Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2008.

Richard Gaillardetz, *By What Authority? A Primer on Scripture, the Magisterium, and the Sense of the Faithful*. Collegeville, MN.: Liturgical Press, 2003 ([www.litpress.org](http://www.litpress.org)).

David Stagaman, *Authority in the Church*. Collegeville, MN.: Liturgical Press, 1999.

Francis Sullivan, *Creative Fidelity: Weighing and Interpreting Documents of the Magisterium*. NY, Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996.

## **1. The Christian Catholic Church is a communion of faith and love made up of all of the baptized.**

The first fruit of Jesus' life, death and resurrection is the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

The faithful organized themselves into small communities (Acts 2: 42-47; 4:32-37).

The Church is at once divine and human, an invisible communion in grace and a visible, structured community. Together the two form one interlocking reality, not two separate realities (LG 8).

The whole People of God – laity, ordained, and religious – participate in the threefold life and mission of Jesus as prophet, priest, and king or shepherd (LG 30). (At baptism, all are anointed into the threefold mission of Jesus.)

## **2. The life of the Trinity is the foundation and source of the church's love and communion.**

The Trinity is a communion of the mutual love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This love is eternally dynamic and intense in total giving and receiving. Love is a shared love. This love is not conformity, but a unified diversity.

We have share in this dynamic of love by and through Jesus, whose Spirit dwells within us (Rom. 5.5) and the entire body of Christ (Mt. 25.31-46; 1 Cor. 12.12-31).

Other models of the church, such as sacrament, herald, servant, are rooted in the dynamic of this "communion of love." The other models are aspects of the life of Jesus and reflect his mission (See Dulles, *Models of the Church*).

We the church, created the various forms of institution to provide order to the church.

## **3. We participate in the life of the Trinity through Jesus, as the body of Christ.**

The love of God is poured out into our hearts through the gift of the Spirit—that is the spirit of Jesus ( Rom 5:5).

Jesus identifies himself with the body, with the Church (Mt. 25.31-46).

Of his conversion Paul writes that the voice of Jesus is identified with the suffering humanity, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9: 1-9).

Paul writes of the body of Christ, "so we who are many, are one body in Christ (Rom 12: 4; 1 Cor. 12: 12-30).

## **4. The church has been called into being for the world. This is the key to our self-understanding and our mission.**

**The Church does not exist for itself! The Church is not the Vatican! Christianity is not the same as the Roman offices in the Vatican!**

**(The Vatican is a human institution that is to ensure the preaching of the gospel.)**

God's revelation to humans continues through the communion of those who follow Jesus.

We are to help build the kingdom of God, that is, a "civilization of love," (John Paul II).

ALL Christians are called to exercise their roles of prophet, priest and king, given to them by virtue of their baptism as members of the body of Christ.

It is in profound dialogue with God and with the world can we find our identity and realize our mission. God is love, a communion of love and we are the people who live in this love, celebrate it, and proclaim it to the world with our lives.

**5. The Church is *Semper Reformanda* ("always reforming or in a state of change").**

The Church is not a perfect society.

The church always needs renewal by reading the signs of the times. It is never finished, but must respond to new challenges (scientific, cultural, political, economic), develop new ways to evangelize, be open to new things to learn.

The church is not the kingdom, the reign of God; it is a sign of and servant of the kingdom.

The Church institution is not higher than the gospel, but serves the gospel as servant leader, as shepherd.

**6. The primary "building material" of the church and of the kingdom is how we relate to each other in the unity of love (Jn. 13.34-35).**

Jesus founds the new church with a new commandment- love one another as he has loved us (Jn. 15:12).

As church we are called and gifted for a profound communion, a holy communion, through the gift of the Spirit.

The Spirit gifts us with the love of God poured out into our heart (Rom 5:5).

With this gift we fall in love with God and live in and out of this love in our relationships with our self, others and all creation (Jn. 17:21). (See also 1 Cor. 12-14).

**7. Through our unity others come to believe and know the love of God.**

The source and power of our mission to share the love of God with others is the Holy Spirit of Jesus that leads us to live and to love as Jesus did.

The church exists for this mission. (For example, a parish without a mission, is not a parish.)

Jesus' prayer for us is that we may have the same unity and intimacy with each other that he has with his Father. Jesus prays that we be united to the Father as he is (Jn. 17).

**8. In communion with each other through the Spirit we are called and gifted for the mission of Christ.**

We experience the love of God within ourselves and within our communion. The mission is empowered by this love, which grows through our life of prayer and loving service to others.

The mission of Jesus, his church, is to extend this transforming experience of love to all and to all creation.

The Church of Christ "subsists in" in the Catholic Church and is, therefore, not simply identical with it (LG 8). Salvation is available outside as well as inside the Catholic Church (LG 16). (Non-Christians can be saved. Every religion has a seed of the truth.)

The body of Christ is composed of more than Catholics (Decree on Ecumenism, 3). The body of Christ includes all people of good will.)

Religious freedom is required for all, including non-Catholics, because of their human dignity and the freedom of the act of faith (Declaration on Religious Freedom, 2-4).

**9. We celebrate our holy communion in the Eucharist and are fed physically and spiritually to continue our mission to build a civilization of love.**

In our celebration of the Eucharist we experience our unity of faith and love with God and one another and give thanks.

We say “amen” renewing our commitment to our union with and mission for the Reign of God.

As Christians we are called and graced to:

Understand the *Church* as *us*.

Understand *us* as a *communion*

Understand *communion* as *unity*

Understand *unity* as *love for each other (unified diversity)*

Understand *God's love* as the basis of *communion*

Realize *God's love* for *one's self* and for the *other*

Live out *the demands of love* for *self* and for the *other*.

**Bibliography**

Catechism of the Catholic Church, # 748-953-, 2041-2043

John Fullenbach, SVD *Church: Community for the Kingdom*

Daniel Harrington, S. J. *The Church According to the New Testament*

The Documents of Vatican II, *Lumen gentium and Gaudium et spes*.

Questions for group discussion:

1. Comment: “The Church is the community of the baptized, who have the mission to transformed the world with the gospel message of Jesus Christ.”
2. How is the Christian community the body of Christ? Read 1 Cor. 12. 12-31.
3. God is expressed in terms of the Trinity, a unity with diversity: one God and three Persons. How is this *diversified unity* expressed in a parish setting?
4. How should a parish be organized into small communities, if Church is a communion of small communities?
5. If the Church does not exist for itself, then for what, should the Church do?
6. What does baptism mean in terms of my incorporation into the Church? How is baptism a commitment to love God and neighbor?
7. If the Church is not the Vatican, then who makes up the Church? What is its mission?
8. If other non-Catholic, non-Christian religions have a seed of the truth, as taught by Vatican II, then how should we, as Church, relate to Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists?
9. What does “unified diversity” really mean? How is this concept applied to a parish setting? To the planet?
10. When can a small community call itself “a Church”?