

MISSION: THE SYMBOL FOR UNDERSTANDING THE CHURCH TODAY

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IN ADDRESSING the question of the Church in today's world, I will present the following ideas and imperatives according to a pedagogical scheme that has been characterized by some educators as problematization. Such a procedure entails, of course, more than an arbitrary device for facilitating communication. It may be taken as fundamental to human understanding that the mind addresses data with questions, and that there can be no really critical grasp of anything unless what is to be understood responds to an active and inquiring intelligence. It seems to me, moreover, that in the question of the Church today the inquiry should be marked by a sense of urgency, because the problems faced by the Church in the modern world are many and real.

In the first part of the essay, after outlining the fundamental problem that besets the Christian looking at his Church, I will suggest that the question of the Church today is a moral one, that is, a problem of concrete decision and action. At the same time, all attempts to reduce the problem of the Church to merely one of action fail to see that the problem lies just as deeply in the domain of theological understanding. In the second part, I will enumerate some of the theological resources and developments that may be employed for dealing with the problem of the Church. In the third section, I will outline briefly how these theological data might be employed to begin to frame a consistent understanding of the Church for today's culture.

Throughout this essay the word "Church" refers to the visible Church, that is, the community which is in varying degrees and at various levels organized and institutionalized,¹ and which calls itself "church."

¹ The word "institution" and its derivatives are used neutrally throughout this essay to refer to the public forms, patterns, role differentiation, and discipline that are assumed by any stable community. I realize that institutions are often at odds with the spontaneity of the original "spirit" of a religious community and thus are often considered a negative factor in religion; it is assumed here that they can also be positive. The usage, moreover, is not exclusive, as if to suggest that the Church is "only" or "merely" an institution. The point is rather that we are dealing with the concrete and empirical Church of history, and as such it will always have an external and more or less objective form. Finally, since I am Roman Catholic, that particular bias will be noted, but I hope that what I say of the Church has more universal relevance.

THE CHURCH AS PROBLEM

Many and varied are the problems that face the ecclesiologist as he approaches an understanding of the Church. But one problem today seems more basic than all the rest and may be considered the fundamental problem of the Church. This problem is radical in the sense that it involves the very basis or reason for being a religious person and a Christian. Logically, only after that question receives a positive response does the question of being a member of the Church arise. This problem of the Church is also fundamental in the sense that it challenges the very right of the Church to exist. In order to answer such a question, one must arrive at the very *raison d'être* of the Church. The problem referred to can be seen from two closely related points of view, or as having two reciprocally related dimensions. These concern the immanence and transcendence of the Church.

Church Immanent?

Two suppositions underlie this dimension of the problem of the Church. The first is theological and may be expressed baldly in this way: Any Christian doctrine and consequently any understanding of the Church must enter into and correlate with human experience.² Christian doctrines cannot be conceived of as preformed teachings from on high, worked out coherently in themselves, and passively received by the human race. Rather, theological and doctrinal expressions of faith must express faith as it is generated in people's lives and experienced in each age and culture. So central and fundamental and, in a sense, so obvious is this principle that it may be stated somewhat categorically that unless a teaching or doctrine on the Church is experienced as meaningful and relevant for life in this world, whether it confirm, confront, or seek to transform life in this world, it is non-sense.

The second supposition resides in the cultural phenomenon that more and more human beings are experiencing a feeling of being at home in this world and of responsibility for much of the human condition. Whether naturalism, or historical consciousness and secularism, or (as some suggest) Christianity itself, or all of these together are responsible for this, does not concern us here. What is important is the growing cultural phenomenon itself. To a greater or lesser degree human beings are subjects of history, and the way we corporately exercise our freedom

² Maurice Blondel was the first to express this for Catholic theology in a systematic way, and he did so with such decisiveness that it is accepted by most theologians today. The principle should not be taken to obscure the fact that religious experience is often prophetic and that God may be experienced as Judge. It simply asserts, almost tautologically, that such judgment and authority must also be experienced in order to be relevant.

in history bears an ultimate significance, whether of positive or negative import, for ourselves and the future. However distorted by selfish concerns, however perverted by ignorance, however contradicted in actual fact by ambiguous decisions, the implicit and constant desire of men and women today is to build a better world and a more humane society for all. Thus the human quest to find meaning in the world and in history is becoming more and more a conscious one. Not even the threat of death or the general experience of finitude undermines this conviction that life in this world must make sense in this world. While we are alive, this world is our home. Of itself, the promise of an afterlife, or a world outside and beyond this world, need not be any answer at all to the question of the meaning of life in this world and of how to live it; for the question of the meaning of human history arises from within history itself, and the fact of afterlife does not answer the question of the mode of conduct which is appropriate to this life. In fact, a reliance on such an afterlife, if it is extrinsic to human history, *may* negate the values of the very history it seeks to affirm.

If these suppositions be true, then it follows that any understanding of the Church today must correlate with the experience that people have of themselves, of their world, and of the project that they envisage as possible in and for this world.³ Moreover, if these suppositions be true, the most serious objection to any doctrine of the Church is contained in the one put forward by secular humanism, namely, that Christianity and being a member of the Church distract human beings from their project in history and rob them of their responsibility for the events of history. One can, of course, formulate retorts to the classical articulations of this charge in such thinkers as Feuerbach and Freud, Marx and Dewey, and others, but such an effort would miss both the force and the truth of their statement. Its persuasive power resides in the fact that what was once the formulation of the experience of a rather rationalistic culture of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries has now become the common consciousness, in varying degrees, of a large portion of generally educated persons in the world today. Throughout the world the Church has a mortal rival in either Marxism of one sort or another or in other social humanitarian movements.⁴ The truth of their critique lies in its accuracy in describing what has happened in the modern period.

³This is a major theme in Karl Rahner's *The Shape of the Church to Come* (London, 1974).

⁴These movements and their specific appeals and promises, their particular logics and languages, vary greatly in different parts of the world. Yet they agree on certain basic suppositions about the nature of humanity and the task that is ours in this world. Both these differences and these commonalities must be appreciated if one is to see the relevance of social humanitarian movements in other parts of the world and the pertinence for one's own situation of the various Christian responses to them and adaptations from them.

A direct polemic against, or an attempted refutation of, secular humanism would also be out of place because it would beg the question; it would inevitably fail to grant the truth in the humanist critique on another level, that is, its *inner* element of truth. God, after all, is God, and as transcendent *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* has the power to draw the human person and a whole community into Himself with the absoluteness that is correlative to and inherent in an experience of God. The mystics testify that such an absorption can be total, and William James confirms that all religious experience is in some degree mystical.⁵ There is, then, an essential and intrinsic tendency in religion to draw a person or a people out of this world, to devalue history, to say that our true home is not here but in heaven, and to seek forgiveness from God without attending to our neighbor whom we have hurt.⁶ Christianity and the life of the churches are hardly an exception to this law.

The Church is most severely touched by the humanist critique of Christian faith because in church the dangers of religion have been institutionalized in structures and public language. The phrase "the Church and the world" is symbolic of the many categories that have functioned as dualisms, although they are not necessarily such, and thus have served to cut the Church off from history: supernatural and natural, salvation history and secular history, the sacred and the profane, eternity and time. There is a tendency to absolutize and divinize the Church itself.⁷ For example, the concept of the "Body of Christ" can be and has been employed in such a way that the Church is hypostasized into a divine entity with divine qualities of authority and holiness subsisting above history. Authority and holiness are seen adhering in the institutional Church whether or not the historical criteria of these moral and theological qualities are met. To the extent that the Church today remains that institution or those communities or groups who possess the word and the sacraments as the means for the eternal salvation of their members, it is peculiarly vulnerable to the humanist critique; for this is a definition of a privileged group, set aside in history, whose self-under-

⁵ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, 1961) p. 299. This does not mean that mystical or religious experience necessarily withdraws one from the world. What is being said here is that this is an intrinsic psychological possibility and constant danger. On the other hand, one may insist that the condition for the possibility of mystical experience is the immanence of God to persons, to history, and to the world. Thus the concept one forms of God becomes vitally important. Finally, the question of holiness is raised here and will be addressed at the end of this essay.

⁶ See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York, 1960) pp. 51-82.

⁷ See Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York, 1967) pp. 129-32, 234-41. This tendency can be seen in Augustine, especially when he stands in contrast to a thinker such as Gregory of Nyssa. See J. Patout Burns, "The Economy of Salvation in Patristic Theology," earlier in this issue.

standing revolves around its own exclusive possession of Christ and his grace.⁸

Church Transcendent?

Again, two suppositions underlie an appreciation of this dimension of the problem of the Church. The first is cultural, the second theological. Contemporary culture may be characterized as empirical-minded and critical. People today distrust every kind of abstract knowledge, especially when it is raised to the level of ideology or objectivized doctrine. One wants to know how one can be sure of this or that doctrine: "How is it known?" Here, too, the philosophies of empiricism, pragmatism, and a "scientific mentality" have filtered down to common consciousness, so that men and women in our world want proof, if they are interested at all in something. Suspicious of authority, they instinctively apply a quasi-positivistic criterion of truth—seeing, touching, experiencing. Credulity is no virtue. Aware of historical relativity and pluralism, people cannot simply accept religious doctrines on the basis of external authority. Rather, in all honesty, they challenge their proponents: "Show me!"

The second supposition is the theological one that the Church does have a divine quality and a transcendent source of its coming-to-be and continued existence in history. No Christian would deny some relation to God as underlying the existence of the Church. The Church is not merely a social institution or voluntary association alongside all others, and a sociological examination or explanation of its nature and function does not exhaust the mystery it contains and is. The Church *is* by a power and energy that comes from a ground that reaches beyond history and culture.

If these suppositions be true, taken in conjunction they indicate where and how the Church must display this transcendence. The transcendence of a Church in history and in the world, among people who live in history and in the world by historical and experiential criteria, must also be manifested in the empirical history of everyday life—that is, if it is to be perceived. The Church, one can say, exists in a twofold relationship. It is related to the world, because it is a part of this world and part of apparently secular history. It is also related to the transcendent God and is the expression of His saving love for history and the race. But these two relationships are mutually interdependent. Without a faithful contact with God, it has lost its transcendence. Conversely, in being relevant to the world, if the Church capitulates to society and culture, especially their sinful patterns of behavior, it has also lost its transcendence. "Since the Church is *in* secular culture, and all its people actually exist there,

⁸ See the first type of Christology and ecclesiology in J. Peter Schineller, "A Spectrum of Christologies and Ecclesiologies," earlier in this issue.

the life of the congregation cannot in any sense express transcendence of the culture around it unless it is willing to challenge the injustice and sins of the wider community in which it lives."⁹

There is no question about the fact that the Church claims transcendence and even proclaims it. But those claims, which have been abstract and dogmatic, invite testing. Too often they have been symbolized in an isolation from the world, or a disinterest in it, and associated with sacred ceremonies performed in the corner of everyday life and on special days. The institutional witness to transcendence is mainly visible in holy places, ritual ceremony, and the uniforms of office. In terms of freedom from sin and love of neighbor, corporate Christian life on the whole appears no different from that of any other group. The saints, both past and present, appear at times to have provided us with our own cargo system. The commandment of love of neighbor, which is the touchstone of the transcendence spoken of here, has often been explicitly limited in both intention and practice to "one's own." But where that is the case, one can scarcely speak of transcendence at all.

The question of the Church outlined in its two dimensions is really one problem: the failure of the Church to become immanent to the world because of an inappropriate transcendence, and its failure to witness to transcendence precisely because of its failure at immanence.¹⁰ The problem is the problem of the Church's credibility. In phrasing the question thus, one seems to invite the cliché that "the real problem of Christianity is that it has never been tried." If people would only live the Christian life, the truth of the Church would become self-evident. This attitude, however, fails to grasp the nature of the problem, because it does not see that what is at stake here also involves a fundamental understanding of the very nature and function of the Church. The problem is integrally religious and theological as well as moral, simply because these dimensions cannot be separated. In spite of this, there still

⁹ Langdon Gilkey, *How the Church Can Minister to the World without Losing Itself* (New York, 1964) p. 71; cf. also p. 27.

¹⁰ I am not saying that this failure is complete or total. And it should be noted that Christianity is able to hear the criticism of secular humanism precisely because an engagement with the world is intrinsic to Christianity. Christianity is not a gnosticism that emancipates one from history and the world. Thus, on the one hand, the criticism of humanism is in principle unjustified. But on the other, it recalls Christian responsibilities that are sometimes neglected. Finally, as to the need that the Churches listen to these criticisms, it should not be forgotten that they may stem from Christian principles, even from grace. As Tillich put it, "There are many people who are critical of the Church, Christianity, and religion generally. Many times this criticism comes from the latent Church, is directed against the manifest Church, and is often effected through the power of principles which belong to, and should be effective in, the manifest Church itself" ("Missions and World History," in Gerald H. Anderson, ed., *The Theology of the Christian Mission* [New York, 1961] p. 288).

remains the tendency to make a radical distinction between understanding the Church and observing its actual performance, or between the "real" Church and its institutional or historical form. Thus, one is inclined to say, after listening to a critical account of Church action in history, that such does not undermine the fundamental credibility of the Church.¹¹ But for the empirical-minded person this distinction—better, this separation—is impossible.

This ability to separate essence and existence, substance and action, reality and performance is precisely the problematic of the Church today. Granted that the Church is not primarily or simply an institution, still one cannot radically distinguish the concretely existing Church from its institutional forms. The public, social, and institutional structures of the Church deeply influence the Christian life of both the individual and the community at every level of existence. So, too, the reality of the Church and its performance cannot be neatly distinguished. After existentialism, it remains axiomatic that being, nature, substance, or essence cannot be separated from action. And the same is true for understanding or knowing. Action flows out of knowledge, and specific forms of action follow upon specific understandings. Reciprocally, one can find behind, within, and implicit to every human action, as well as the lack of it, an intentionality and a logic which either implicitly or explicitly constitute a fundamental understanding of reality. This principle must also be applied to church existence and action; a self-understanding resides there, one that is, reciprocally, constitutive of the Church as it exists today.¹² At stake, then, for Christian theology is the fundamental question of understanding and formulating the basic nature and function of the Church in the world today. This problem is not perfectly identical with that of the nature of Christianity and the Christian life, even though it is intimately related to it; for there are many Christians today—and their number is increasing—who lead lives which are exemplary personal witnesses to Christ and who are at the same time alienated from the Church and its representatives. Such people are a living response to the humanist critique. But insofar as they

¹¹ Gregory Baum, *The Credibility of the Church Today* (New York, 1968) p. 80. I do not mean to give too much weight to this isolated statement of Baum. His thesis is "that Charles Davis [*A Question of Conscience* (New York, 1967)] has described in the Catholic Church the social pathology that threatens every institution" (*ibid.*, p. 63). And, after all, he wrote this book to respond to the criticism and attempt to establish the Church's credibility.

¹² This does not imply that knowledge is virtue. One should not minimize the power of sin within the Church. The thesis states simply that the relative failure of the Church to respond to the modern exigencies of the world through action reveals its failure to respond to the challenge for a renewal of self-understanding.

lead self-transcending lives in the world, they raise the question, from within Christianity itself, why belong to a Church? The problem addressed here, then, is the problem of the Church.

Finally, in order to define the theological strategy for addressing this question, it may be said that the critique spoken to the Church by secular humanism cannot and should not be minimized; it is not a problem to be solved once for all. We have already referred to its truth quality. It is not a question to be set up and knocked down. The experiences which have generated the humanist critique lie deeply embedded in modern culture at large and hence are shared by both non-Christians and Christians alike insofar as they share this culture. The point, then, is that this criticism does not come merely from outside Christianity; the problem exists *for* Christians and *within* the Church. And insofar as the secular-humanist objection represents basic elements of the contemporary experience of both Christian and non-Christian alike, it must be incorporated into and allowed to inform one's view of the Church. What, then, are some of the theological resources that may allow this to happen?

THEOLOGICAL RESOURCES FOR ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

What follows is neither a complete ecclesiology nor a statement of all the resources and data for framing an understanding of the Church. The purpose is not to examine carefully either Scripture or tradition, both of which are needed to ground an adequate or complete theology of the Church. The aim here is much more modest: to list some of the theological moves or shifts that are both available and necessary for beginning to understand the Church today, especially in the light of the problem which confronts it. I wish to examine the situation and experience which form the a priori context out of which an approach to the past must be made.

Concrete, Existential, Historical Viewpoint

To begin, theology today must assume (and to a large extent has assumed) a concrete, existential, and historical point of view. This statement scarcely defines a particular methodology in theology, but rather suggests an a priori stance, attitude, and approach that must underlie any theology of the Church today. Some characteristics of this attitude are collapsed into the three adjectives, which have overlapping and interrelated senses.

The word "existential" is used in opposition to an "objective" and "essentialist" mode of thought, based on the suppositions of naive realism, in which reality is considered "out there" in such a way that it can be known, manipulated, and exactly represented in concepts and

language. The word "historical," as opposed to its contradictory "ahistorical," points to the realization that all understandings and ideas, even the most universal, are rooted in history, are conditioned by particular circumstances in which they are generated, and share the note of singularity and particularity of the consciousness in which they exist. The quality of thinking called "concrete" is opposed to that which is purely "abstract" and conceptual. Since abstraction is the condition of the possibility of human thought, what concrete thinking and logic seek to avoid is conceptualism. Methodologically, concrete thought is empirical (in the healthy sense of Aquinas), experiential, and phenomenological, but with the added note of being critical. A concrete, existential, and historical theology will try to understand the Church as it has and does appear in history and in the light of the data or "facts" as they appear to our consciousness. It will try to avoid the objectifying, hypostasizing, and indeed projecting tendency to view the Church as a reified idea, existing above history, but hardly corresponding with everything else one knows to be real. The Church cannot be a product of "fideism" and an object of "pure" faith.

Apologetic Theology

The over-all form for a theology of the Church today must, for several reasons, be apologetic. Apologetics has as its primary referent the common experience of mankind. Included in its audience, therefore, are both those inside the Church and outside it. It seeks to discover and explain, not to "prove" but to disclose the Church both to Christians and to those outside. In so doing, this theology must appeal to and attempt to be adequate to common human experience. This context is thrust upon us by our new and vivid consciousness of the world and its long history and of our minority status in it. After two thousand years and in a world that is predominantly non-Christian, the Church cannot *presume*, even in its own self-understanding, its absolute truth and right to exist in history with those absolute claims.¹³ A second reason stems from the fact that the world,¹⁴ now used in a different sense, is within the Church. The Church is not over against but part of the world, so that secular consciousness and ideals, the everyday desires and aspirations and

¹³ Augustine's theology offers an extreme example of absolute claims for the visible Church, because in his thought the Church tended (although he realized the Church was sinful) to become identified with the kingdom of God on earth. See Burns, *art. cit.* This apologetic approach to the Church and the question of the Church that flows from it make up one of the distinctive features of Juan Luis Segundo's *The Community Called Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y., 1973).

¹⁴ In the first sense the term "world" denotes the non-Christian sphere; in this second sense it refers to the empirical world with its history and culture. This usage will be explained further in a later part of my paper.

experiences of the human race, are also those of Christians. It is precisely for this reason that apologetic theology is also an essay at self-understanding.

An apologetic context for a theology of the Church means that one draws on the same resources for self-understanding as in systematic or doctrinal theology, that is, history and contemporary Christian experience. However, the context is severely altered and different. Scripture and tradition and contemporary Christian experience can no longer be analyzed, interpreted, and integrated in an isolated manner in order to form a self-enclosed understanding of the Church. Such an understanding is inadequate to our total experience and risks being uncritical. Rather, just as personal self-understanding and identity definition are dialogic and achieved in the interrelation of self with others, society, and the world at large, so too the Church must be approached in its relation to the world in the sense of non-Christian history and in its being-in-the-world of the secular everyday. Thus the Church must take into account the cultural phenomena referred to earlier in order to frame an understanding adequate to contemporary experience.

The New Question of the Church

I have just suggested that the initial approach to the theological understanding of the Church should be the question "Why the Church?"¹⁵ There is another reason why this is so. One of the presuppositions or principles that has revolutionized ecclesiological understanding is the now common one that there *is* salvation outside the Church. Not only is the doctrine "No salvation outside the Church" wrong,¹⁶ but also, statistically speaking, the common, normal, and "ordinary" way and place of salvation is outside the Church. Up to now, and in the foreseeable future, salvation has been and will be achieved for the vast majority of people without any empirical historical connection with Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁷

¹⁵ This question and the theme which follows underlie Richard P. McBrien's *Do We Need the Church?* (New York, 1969). See also his informative *Church: The Continuing Quest* (New York, 1970) and his strategy for Church reform in *The Remaking of the Church* (New York, 1973).

¹⁶ See Schineller's first type of Christology and ecclesiology, *art. cit.* One can certainly investigate the historical genesis of the doctrine of *Nulla salus* and by interpretation find beneath it an authentic Christian experience even for our day. The problem is that these interpretations are never quite clearly communicated by the common usage of the words employed in the proposition. A further problem is that the same can usually be done for heretical doctrines of the past. For example, while the Pelagian doctrine presented by Augustine was rightly condemned, implicit within it are a legitimate concern for the value of human freedom and a view of God who makes His salvation universally available. See R. Haight, "Notes on the Pelagian Controversy," *Philippine Studies* 22 (1974) 26-48.

¹⁷ A denial of this position, it seems, would equally involve a denial of the predominant efficacy of God's universal salvific will and the power of His grace.

This represents a dramatically new common Christian consciousness. It does not mean that most major theologians of the past denied the possibility of salvation outside the Church. For example, they all made accommodations for Abraham, the prophets, and in general the saints of the Old Testament, if not even for the *puer in silvis*. But they had to go to extraordinary lengths to do so, because the history of theology in the West posits a very close relationship between explicit revelation and redemption, between explicit faith and grace. But whereas in the past these were most often considered, practically speaking, coextensive, it is commonly held today that they are not mutually determinative. If this be so, then the following thesis seems unassailable: When one passes from a common presupposition that there is no salvation outside the Church to the supposition that indeed the "ordinary" way of salvation is outside the Church, one must also pass to a fundamentally different understanding of the nature and role of the Church.¹⁸

The effects of this turn can be seen as twofold. First, the Church is "uncentered" in the world, and even in salvation history. The working of God's saving grace in all of history is maximized; the necessity and importance of the Church is perforce lessened.¹⁹ Rather than being the center, the "kingdom of God" or the "reign of God" in all of history supplants the Church as center, and the Church becomes relative to or related to the wider and broader workings of God's grace in the world, in religious as well as "secular" history.

Second, in this context once again the first fundamental question concerning the Church is altered, this time on the grounds of Christian revelation itself.²⁰ The question can no longer be "What is the Church?" on the supposition the Church has an unquestioned necessity in history as the guarantor of ultimate salvation. Rather, the question concerning the Church again appears as "Why the Church?" The paradoxical but real question of the Christian who asks "Why be a Christian?" on the ground of a Christian revelation of the universal acceptance of history by

¹⁸ See Schineller, *art. cit.*

¹⁹ The necessity and importance of the Church is lessened relative to the final salvation of individuals and groups of people. The point here is to analyze the shift of consciousness that has occurred and its consequences. From another point of view one may say that because of its minority status the importance of the Church is heightened.

²⁰ Christianity has commonly held the universal salvific will of God to be a central element of revelation. This objective will of God only becomes objective reality insofar as every human individual is actually affected by the offer of saving grace. In the words of Karl Rahner, "It is part of the Catholic statement of Faith that the supernatural saving purpose of God extends to all men in all ages and places in history. . . . Because of God's universal saving purpose, the offer and possibility of salvation extends as far as extends the history of human freedom" ("History of the World and Salvation-History," *Theological Investigations* 5 [Baltimore, 1966] 103).

God and the universal possibility of salvation becomes the Church's own question. Because it is radical and critical, "Why the Church?" is the only question which will yield an answer that will suffice for Christian understanding today.²¹

Functional Answer

If it is true that the question of the Church has shifted from "What is the Church?" to "Why the Church?" then too the answer concerning the Church will change. I suggest that the new question leads almost inevitably, though often imperceptibly, to a functional answer. One answers the question "What is the Church?" substantively. Such a question asks after the nature of this more or less institutionalized voluntary organization: the Church is the "Body of Christ," the community of faith and sacraments, the hypostasized or personified "Bride of Christ." But one answers the question "Why the Church?" functionally: the purpose of the Church is to do this, or the role of the Church is to accomplish that.

These two understandings of the Church are not exclusive; this will be shown below. However, they are two fundamentally different ways of approaching an understanding of the Church.²² The first leads to an understanding of the Church as a "thing-in-itself" or an independent society or community. For example, a substantive view of the Church may look at the Church "primarily in terms of its societal or institutional endowments," and see that substance of the Church as having existed from the beginning in one particular historical and visible community.²³ The second understanding is generated out of the relational context of the apologetic question itself and sees the Church as a community

²¹ This shift can also be seen in the growing importance of the theme "the Church and the world." The status of this question is slowly passing from a corollary or related topic in ecclesiology to a central issue; what was formally a special question is now being perceived as the heart of the matter. It is in this sense that the term "radical" is used in this paper; no political biases are intended.

²² These two understandings do not necessarily exclude each other; for while the substantive question can be answered without clear reference to the function or purpose of the Church, the inverse is not the case: language about the purpose and function of the Church necessarily presupposes and includes what one is talking about. Therefore, in any contrast between these two approaches to the Church, it should not be imagined that the question "Why the Church?" generates a "merely functional" or only a descriptive sociological understanding of what the Church does or should be doing in the world. It will be shown below how the function of the Church includes a conception of its "substance."

²³ Avery Dulles, "The Church, the Churches, and the Catholic Church," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 33 (1972) 209, 200-203. Such an institutional definition of the Church is not exhaustive of possible substantive views. Sears, e.g., defines the Church substantively as a community; see his article "Trinitarian Love as the Ground of the Church" later in this issue.

intrinsically in relation to the world, to the secular, non-Christian sphere. From the very question of the role of the Church in the world it appears that the Church is not *simply* constituted by a "vertical" relation to God through the risen Christ, but also by a purposeful or intentional relation to non-Church in the world. Such a view of the Church will consequently be "relative,"²⁴ one in which the Church will be seen as essentially influenced by the particular world it is addressing and affected by it. Such an a priori will generate an ecclesiology considerably different from one whose goal is to establish universal and normative institutional structures, or one which defines the Church simply as community. In this view, essential structures will primarily be grasped "empirically," as it were, in their constancy in and through history and in accordance with the specific task or service they are meant to accomplish.²⁵

Again, a substantive approach to the Church will first determine the nature of the Church and, in light of this, decide what it can do in the world according to its predetermined nature. In this sense, and in terms of the overworked but still useful adjectives "static" and "dynamic," a substantive understanding is static. A relational and functional understanding of the Church will be dynamic in the sense that it will involve decisions concerning what the Church is supposed to be doing in the world and interpret and adjust the institutions accordingly.

With those methodological considerations in view, we must now address the issue of the theological resources for responding to the functional question of "Why the Church?" in more-specific terms.

Mission Theology

One does not have to look hard to find a scriptural and traditional symbol responding to the question of the dynamic and functional relation of the Church to the world. The symbol is "mission." Mission theology is the one locus in ecclesiology that answers directly the functional question of the Church in the wider world context. Though formerly no more than a footnote to the study of the Church, in the last seventy-five years the study of the mission of the Church has become a discipline in itself. Moreover, the theology of the mission of the Church has shown a remarkable development over these years, and has mediated

²⁴This is to say "relative to the world," though not exclusively so. The Church retains a constant relationship to God through its members by means of His immanence to the Church by His Spirit or grace.

²⁵This is not to deny that certain normative and even constitutive elements of the Church, if not of salvation, flow from the Christ event itself, such as Scripture or the Eucharist. Moreover, the exact function of the whole Church in history will vary according to one's Christology. See Schineller, *art. cit.*, and Burns, *art. cit.*

a change in consciousness for those working at the frontier of the Church, on the boundary, as it were, between the Church and the non-Christian and secular "world," that has far outstripped the development of consciousness within the established churches.

If one allows the symbol of "mission" to command the context of reflection on the Church and makes it the point of departure for beginning to understand the Church as a whole, the result will be an ecclesiology considerably different from the traditional, even while remaining in close continuity with that tradition, especially scriptural tradition. This can be seen, for example, in the work of the late Johannes Hoekendijk.²⁶ For him, the nature of the Church, what the Church is, is completely determined by its role, its mission to and for the world, the participation in Christ's mission of proclaiming and helping to effect God's *shalom* in history. Hoekendijk moves a step further and embraces an "actualist" ecclesiology. The Church "*happens* insofar as it actually proclaims the Kingdom to the world."²⁷ A Church not engaged in such action is really only an empty shell, an empirical phenomenon to be sure, but not the authentic Church of Christ. This actualist position, I would take it, is valid as a theological ideal raised to the level of prophetic judgment. But the view is difficult to apply both empirically and ontologically. Every Church is institutional in some measure, and fidelity to Christ's mission is never perfect; one must take into account the fact that the Church is sinful. I will show below why an extreme actualist position need not be held.

From this functional point of view it would seem that Vatican II's Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity is a much more significant document than it is normally considered to be. First, though only a decree and not a dogmatic constitution, it argues dogmatically. It harks back to *Lumen gentium* and says that the Church is essentially and by its nature in a condition of mission. Moreover, it says that the whole Church, everywhere and in all its members, is missionary. Such is the intrinsic quality of the Christian life itself, and so of the life of the whole Church. Thus it defines a "nature" of the Church that is also essentially "functional" and outgoing to and for the world.

Church as Sign

The second major theological symbol that responds to the question "Why the Church?" is the concept of the Church as sacrament or sign. Canonized by Vatican II in several of its documents, some think it the most important theological achievement of the Council. One reason is

²⁶ See his *The Church Inside Out* (Philadelphia, 1966).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

the versatility of the symbol: it combines in a remarkable way theoretical understanding and concrete practical considerations; it unites the external and internal aspects of the Church, its communitarian and institutional dimensions; it unifies on a higher level within itself both word and sacrament; strategies of evangelization and development can be shown to be integrated within it, and so on. But most important for this discussion, the concept of sign, symbol, or sacrament combines "substance" and "function," community and mission, in an extraordinarily clear way.

When the theology of the Church as sign or sacrament was developed not many years ago (although the concept can be found in the patristic period), the concept did not have a very strong functional intentionality.²⁸ More and more, however, the functionality of the Church as sign is being explored to respond to the question of the Church's place in world history. Granted that the Church *is* a sign or sacrament, what is the *efficacy* of the sign? A sign is only a sign when it actually signifies. Given a concrete, existential, and historical point of view, and given the context of the world and the Church as mission to and for it, the question becomes, how should the Church go about its task of signifying? Granted the Church possesses grace—for in the Christian view the whole world is graced—the question remains of the specific role of the Church in signifying and demonstrating that truth. In this way the concept of the Church as sign is absorbed into the functionalist context of "mission" to the world, is rendered relational, and begins to operate existentially and dynamically, even while the "substantive" substructure is preserved. Thus the response to the substantive question of the Church remains intact: the Church *is* the community of faith, the Church *is* an institution, the Church *is* the Body of Christ and a sacrament. But the very purpose of this Church's existence in history is its mission. And once again the question of the Church is led back to one of credibility, how it should fulfil its mission.

Church Not in Service to Itself

As a conclusion to this part of the discussion, its logic leads inevitably to the affirmation that the Church is not primarily in service to itself. This statement represents the most radical shift for one's understanding of the Church today. It marks a certain about-face in relation to many ecclesologies of the past. And yet it seems inescapable. A self-serving or self-preoccupied intentionality cannot explain an expansive primitive

²⁸ See Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York, 1974) pp. 58-70, for a brief overview of this understanding of the Church.

Church or a Paul. Rather, the Church from the beginning was in service of the *missio Dei*, and presumably the object of that is universal human history and the world. The Church is primarily in service to the world; it is sent to those outside itself. There is, of course, no need to interpret this exclusively; one need not deny that the Church is a community of worship and mutual support and nourishment in the faith.²⁹ But this aspect of the Church's life should always nourish and lead to the execution of the Church's primary mission.

Once again the point that is being made here must be clarified, since the issue is fundamental and has implications for two basic spiritualities which are at present polarizing the Roman Catholic Church.³⁰ On the level of everyday Christian living, there is no doubt that prayerful interiority and contact with God through Christ in communities are necessary to sustain an outgoing Christian service to the world. At this level there can be no question of priority, since the two movements are strictly reciprocal. Just as the human personality grows in responding to the other and can respond the better the more it grows in integral maturity, so it is with Christian life and the Church. What is being affirmed here, however, must be understood at a much deeper level. The question is one of understanding the very purpose of the Church, its *raison d'être* in history. God's revelation is mediated in and through people in this world. The purpose of the Church's existence is the world to which it is sent, because it is the continuing agent of God's revelation rendering it actual and available to other people. The ground for this position is Christological, then, but not simply in the sense that the Church is to be patterned after the historical Jesus as the "man for others,"³¹ which indeed it should. Rather, the Church finds its ground of being in the event of Christ as a "mission" and revelation from God to the world in history. A continuing response to God through Jesus Christ is therefore essential and constitutive of the Church, but in this conception it is not an end in itself; for what is at stake is precisely the quality of that response to God through Christ. To be Christian and to be Church means to be "chosen" for service to continue the work of Christ in the world. This outward orientation to the world thus becomes a

²⁹ For the Church as community united by Trinitarian love, see Sears, *art. cit.* This substantive view of the Church is accepted here as a presupposition; the Church *is* a community *for* mission.

³⁰ The reference is, on the one hand, to the charismatic and prayer movements, and on the other, to the growing concern for social engagement on the part of the Church.

³¹ The assertion that the only significance of Jesus is that he should be imitated, and the sole reason for the Church is to generate followers who lived as he did, would result in a Christology and ecclesiology of Schineller's fourth type.

determinative factor in Christian spirituality, a criterion, and this in a final (teleological) way.³²

THE CHURCH IN TODAY'S WORLD

We have seen the humanist critique of what it takes to be the necessary failure of the Church to become immanent to the world, and the Church's failure at transcendence in its being-in-the-world. We have also seen how a reconstruction of an understanding of the Church might begin by taking that critique seriously, while at the same time using traditional symbols and contemporary theological insights. In this section I want to sketch how some of the theological data already presented might be brought to bear on the problem of the Church in such a way as to generate a coherent understanding of the nature and function of the Church that also responds to that problem.

Knowledge and Action

Ultimately, the problem of the Church as organization and institution is one of credibility, and this is a moral and political problem.³³ Both the problem of the Church and the problem of understanding the Church are grounded in the behavior of the Church in the world. The final response to the question of the Church can be none other than performance, and this is the case not only for those standing outside the Church and observing it, but also for the Christian. To begin, then, a brief reflection on the relation between knowledge and action is necessary.

Knowledge and behavior are intimately related. Because the human person is one, there is a point where understanding or knowing and action converge in personal existence. In the total life of the person, knowledge on all its levels is for action, and action in its turn informs knowledge. Just as knowing is itself a form of action, so human action in all its forms

³²This is confirmed both by Matthew's Gospel and in Luke-Acts. See William Thompson and Eugene LaVerdiere, "New Testament Communities in Transition: A Study of Matthew and Luke," earlier in this issue. Relative to the Christologies developed in Schineller's article, this ecclesiology may be seen to flow from either his second, a constitutive and normative Christology, or his third, a normative but nonconstitutive Christology. In a constitutive Christology, however, because the exalted unique and divine status of Christ is so prominent, there is danger that Christian attention be so focused on his person that his will or mandate for his followers be slighted. The danger is that the Christian experiences his relationship to Christ in and for itself and not as including the element of being chosen for mission.

³³Even though the word "political" is ambiguous, I continue to use it because none other is as exact. "Politics" here does not have the narrow meaning of running civil government; much less does it mean dealing "behind the scenes" or in "back rooms." It refers simply to people both in official capacities and unofficial positions managing their public affairs in whatever sphere.

is a kind of knowing: its inner logic and response contain an implicit or more or less explicit unveiling of the object of response, of reality.

This brief analysis, however, can be pushed considerably further to show how knowledge really depends on the will, that is, on decision and action. This insight was developed by Blondel in *L'Action*³⁴ and is especially relevant in religious matters. A distinction must be made between "notional" knowledge, a coherent set of concepts or symbols, no matter how objective in themselves, and "possessive" knowledge. The problematic in the distinction between these two kinds of knowledge does not lie in the relation between ideas and their correspondence to reality, or between subjective experience and objective knowledge. The question is whether or not a person enters into a qualitatively different relationship, an actual and existential relationship, with the reality that ideas happen to express. Ultimately, only action can mediate this passage; possessive knowledge is a function of a willing or choosing what is known and putting that "knowledge" into act. "That which was simply an idea of the object becomes, in complete truth, an objective certitude and a real possession."³⁵ Action, especially in relation to that which is finally transcendent, is that which alone can mediate a real or existential or possessive knowledge. Action in that sense, then, is the final criterion of religious knowledge. In the realm of personal affirmation of truth, it is the ultimate and necessary criterion; in the public realm, that is, in the mediation of truth to others, it is a necessary but not necessitating criterion.

In the light of this principle, that action is the final criterion of validity and truth, what performance is necessary to "demonstrate" the truth of the Church, its immanence and transcendence, to those outside? How is the Church to be a valid sign to the world to which it is sent? More importantly, what action is demanded by the Church to validate its claims *to its own members*, that is, to itself? Working from the principle that action and understanding are mutually determinative, the theological question of the Church in today's world becomes a reciprocally related double question: What understanding of the Church is necessary to mediate her performance in the world, and what understanding is necessitated by the action that is demanded of the Church by the world?

³⁴ Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essai d'une critique de la vie et d'une science de la pratique* (Paris, 1893 and 1950). I have sketched the development of Blondel's early thought in "The Unfolding of Modernism in France: Blondel, Laberthonnière, Le Roy," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 35 (1974) 632-66.

³⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 440. This distinction is not to be confused with Newman's notional vs. real assent. The point here is quite different. In Newman, the point of the distinction is the quality of the apprehension and assent. In Blondel, the point is the existential engagement with and possession of the reality in both apprehension and assent, or the lack of this.

Church and World

The term "world" has always been ambiguous in Christian vocabulary. The term is used here in two senses. In the first place, the symbol "world" refers to the field of human activity; it is the empirical universe, especially our planet; it is our world, with the people in it and with a special reference to human history and culture. In a second and rather uniquely Christian sense, "the world" refers to non-Christians. Those who are not inside the Church, both those who embrace other religions than Christianity and those who live in an "unchurched" sphere of existence, are often implicitly designated by the Christian use of "world." In neither case, however, does the symbol "world" have the pejorative sense it sometimes receives in John's Gospel. But neither is that pejorative sense excluded. There is sin in the world, and an uncritical view of the world is alien to Christianity and secular culture alike.³⁶ But the world and sin are not and should not be considered synonymous. If there is sin in the world, there is also sin in the Church,³⁷ so that the element of sin cannot be held as a point of differentiation between the Church and the world.

In the Christian view of things the world is not negative, nor is it neutral; ultimately, the world in both senses must be viewed positively. The doctrines of creation, providence, and redemption portray the one world and the one history of the race, the only world and the only history we have, as salvific. "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more."³⁸ Here again a concrete historical and existential theology must view the action of God's providence and grace in the world in a way that disallows all sharply dualistic conceptions of nature and grace, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man, the religious and the secular; for if one admits a universal salvific will of God, which traditional Christianity by and large has, then one must also view the whole human sphere (the world in both senses) as positively under the influence of God's grace. In no way, then, except as a rejection of grace which is sin, can the world or life in it be viewed negatively. The world and human

³⁶ See David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York, 1975) pp. 10-14.

³⁷ See Karl Rahner, "The Church of Sinners" and "The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II," *Theological Investigations* 6 (Baltimore, 1969) 253-63, 270-94.

³⁸ Rom 5:20. The following position of Karl Rahner may be considered a commentary on this text: "It is furthermore impossible that this offer of supernatural, divinizing grace made to all men on account of the universal salvific purpose of God, should in general (prescinding from the relatively few exceptions) remain ineffective in most cases on account of the personal guilt of the individual. For, as far as the gospel is concerned, we have no really conclusive reason for thinking so pessimistically of men. On the other hand, and contrary to every merely human experience, we do have every reason for thinking optimistically of God and his salvific will which is more powerful than the extremely limited stupidity and evil-mindedness of men" ("Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," *Theological Investigations* 5 [Baltimore, 1966] 123).

history are grounded in an offer of salvation, and it is here and only here that salvation is accomplished.

Once this totally negative view of the world as intrinsically evil in itself is cleared away, one is free to look upon the relation of the Church to the world in more positive terms. In the first place, when the world is conceived as the empirical sphere of human activity, the Church must be seen as integrally part of this world. As long as it exists, the Church simply is a more or less influential part of human history sheerly on the practical level of matter of fact. But over and above this, the sociology of religion has shown that religion, and therefore the Church, tends to be the preserver and guarantor of the more profound meanings and values of culture, a role which Tillich, on a deeper level, has termed "the substance of culture."³⁹ In short, whether the Church is active or passive in relation to the world, it plays a vital and inescapable role in the world and its history.

The Church is also intrinsically and positively related to the world when "world" is understood as the sphere of non-Christians or those outside the Church. This is so because ultimately the Church is the institutionalization of Christian faith and the Christian life. This Christian faith, however, involves as essential elements the love of God and the love of neighbor in such a way that the two are inextricably united and cannot be considered separable.⁴⁰ It follows, then, that the Church, as the whole body or community of those who share the same faith, must assume in its institutionalized and communitarian forms the same characteristics of love of neighbor relative to the world; for it is in this way that the institutional aspect of the Church fosters and supports the inner dynamism of its own life of faith and at the same time renders it visible and public.⁴¹

³⁹ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York, 1964) pp. 40-43.

⁴⁰ Karl Rahner, "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God," *Theological Investigations* 6 (Baltimore, 1969) 231-49.

⁴¹ This argument will be developed further in a later portion of my essay. The importance of the principle should not be lost because of the brevity of the statement here. Much of the theology of liberation, as well as related themes of "development" in mission theology, ultimately rest on the essential place of love of neighbor in Christian life. These theologies, insofar as they are "theologies," do not rest on a Marxist view of reality or a sociology of revolution. I agree with John A. Coleman that there must be "a theory of the middle range," an economic, political, and social ethics, to mediate between a Christian view of history and concrete political action. "Liberation theology must become much more a social ethics than it has so far, if it is going to be an effective instrument in suggesting concrete political praxis" ("Vision and Praxis in American Theology: Orestes Brownson, John A. Ryan, and John Courtney Murray," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 37 [1976] 32-33). But here we are dealing with the prior question of why the Church should be concerned with the world at all, and how it should conceive its relationship to it. See, finally, the fourth and highest level of Church existence in Sears's article "Trinitarian Love as Ground of the Church."

In sum, both the world and the Church's relation to it must be viewed positively. Moreover, the Church is as a matter of fact and should be actively engaged in this world. But exactly how is this involvement to be understood, and how is the Church to be understood in such a way that this active and positive relation is protected and nourished?

Church as Mission to World

The symbol "mission" releases a whole set of closely interrelated meanings which are all cognate to the basic idea of "being sent." The symbol thus discloses a Church that exists as an intrinsically and essentially dynamic, expansive, and outward-oriented community.⁴² The Church as mission would be a community of people with a "commission," those who have received a mandate and hence exist with an inner obligation or responsibility to fulfil that which they are sent *for* related to those they are sent *to*. Without developing this symbol fully—for this is not the purpose here—it may be said, first, that the object of the mission of the Church is the world in the sense that it is to the world that it is sent. Secondly, the object of the mission in the sense of its purpose is to be a sign to and for the world of what it has received from Christ. The first object of the mission will be developed in this section, the second in the following section.

The Church *is* mission, and it is mission to the world. In this statement the radicality of the symbol begins to appear. Adrian Hastings has put it succinctly:

It is, therefore, somewhat misleading to say that the Church has a mission, as if the existence of the Church comes first. In truth it is because of the mission that there is a Church; the Church is the servant and expression of the mission. The mission consequently dictates the nature of the Church and in so far as the Church fails to live up to the demands of mission, it is effectively failing to be Church.⁴³

⁴² The symbol "mission" is not to be confused or identified with the term "missionary." The missionary movement is only one form of the outward-oriented and expansive nature of the Church. Missionary expansion has dominated the understanding of the Church's mission in the past, and it is still significant, but it will become increasingly less so as the so-called "one world" phenomenon increases—which is to say, as more and more areas and cultures are exposed to a Christian presence, witness, and influence. But the symbol will always retain its significance as dictating an outward turning toward the world.

⁴³ Adrian Hastings, "Mission," *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner (New York, 1975) p. 968. See Thompson's essay, where the emergent self-understanding of the Matthean Church was based on the idea of "mission," and LaVerdiere, where the universality of the Church and the mission towards Rome is a constant throughout Luke-Acts. In both, the very purpose of the Church is to continue the mission of Jesus to the whole world.

The object of this mission, those to whom this Church is sent, is the world; the Church is sent to people in history. The Church's existence is thus defined as intrinsically oriented towards the world in the sense of those people outside itself. In being thus defined, the Church is firmly rooted in a religious conception that is fundamental to the Old Testament and the New and is continued in the tradition of Augustine and Aquinas: God works in history through human agents, revelation is mediated to history through what is classically called "economy." From this it follows that, although the empirical or phenomenal object of the Church's mission is the world in all its temporality and secularity, there can be no confusion of the Church with other agents of social amelioration. The Church is not the World Bank or Rotary International. Rather, it is both drawn and driven forward by the *missio Dei* as this has been revealed in Jesus the Christ.

This symbol is proposed here as fundamental and all-embracing for understanding the Church today. This does not mean that there is not or should not be pluralism in understanding the Church. In *Models of the Church* Avery Dulles has demonstrated by typology that several different understandings of the Church coexist among Christians at the same time. The symbol "mission" does not negate this pluralism but transcends it. As an expression of the fundamental reason for the Church's existence the symbol of "mission" is an a priori which includes more specific models within itself and at the same time is a criterion for judging them. Pluralism is a healthy phenomenon so long as it is set in a wider context of a unified and basic intention; only then will pluralism be neither divisive nor debilitating. Theoretically, then, "mission" is the biblical symbol adequate for understanding the Church in relation to the world today, given the problem it faces.⁴⁴ And practically speaking, in terms of action, without such a common understanding the Church will stand helpless, divided, and inactive in the face of social situations which require its response.

The proposition that the symbol "mission" is the all-embracing category for understanding the Church today involves a constant tension between two principles. On the one hand, what James Gustafson has called "thematic unitarianism," or what might also be termed "thematic monophysitism," must be avoided: "By a thematic unitarianism I mean the isolation, accentuation, and even the exclusive concentration upon a

⁴⁴ The symbol "mission" is thus proposed as meeting the double "criterion of adequacy" to common contemporary experience and "criterion of appropriateness" to the scriptural understanding of the Church. See Tracy, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-87. See also his "The Task of Fundamental Theology," *Journal of Religion* 54 (1975) 13-33.

single theological theme (such as liberation), a single moral imperative (such as the imperative to love), or a single technique for 'salvation' (such as the human potential movement)."⁴⁵ The theology of the Church, he continues, is mult textured and multivalent, just as human life is multidimensional. On the other hand, one must seek for unity and coherence in one's understanding of the Church, and this involves choosing centers of focus and organizing the dimensions of the Church in relation to one another. For the Church to act in the world and not simply exist, it must discern priorities among values and respond to imperatives. In the light of this tension, therefore, the symbol "mission" is not proposed as exclusive but as inclusive, comprehensive, and all-encompassing. Although it is traditional, its dynamic quality responds to the urgent experience and problem of the contemporary world, namely, human responsibility in handling not simply nature but, more importantly, human relationships in history. Although this problem has not been described at any length—for this would require a detailed analysis of contemporary historical consciousness and the rising expectations of the masses of the disenfranchised of this earth—the thesis proposed depends on the recognition of this as the crisis of our times, the crisis of the meaning of history, and on the conviction that Christianity has spiritual resources to contribute to meeting it on a variety of levels. The problem of the world thus becomes the problem of the Church and its self-understanding. The tension within the life of the Church today lies in a new call to draw upon the multidimensional resources of its inner and transcendent spiritual life and to turn with these toward the world. "Mission" is a category for understanding which may allow this to happen.

Finally, Vatican II has laid the groundwork for such a self-understanding of the Church in Roman Catholicism, as can be illustrated in its statement on the Church as mission. In this document the symbol "mission" is viewed as totally encompassing the Church, and this can be seen in four distinct but interrelated assertions. First, each Christian, every single person in the Church, shares a mission responsibility.⁴⁶ Second, the Church as a whole corporation or community or institution is a mission.⁴⁷ Third, the Church is essentially a mission; this is what the Church is by its very nature. Mission constitutes the "basic duty of the People of God."⁴⁸ Therefore, fourth, wherever the Church is, mission is at

⁴⁵ James M. Gustafson, "What Ought to Be the Issue for Religion in American Society in the 1980's," *Chicago Seminary Register* 65 (1975) 4.

⁴⁶ Constitution on the Church, no. 17 (*The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. W. M. Abbott [New York, 1966] p. 36); Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, nos. 23, 36 (*Documents*, pp. 613, 623).

⁴⁷ Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, no. 35 (*Documents*, p. 623).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, nos. 35, 2 (*Documents*, pp. 623, 585).

the very center of its inner life; it is not to be conceived as something going on at the borders or periphery of the Church. The Church is never "established" so that mission ceases. Every local church or parish congregation is mission, so that it keeps on going out to the world, to fellow citizens and human beings, to the men and women who live around them.⁴⁹ The mission that is the Church does not cease.⁵⁰

Church as Sign

The Church's nature and role is clarified further by looking at the meaning of the symbol "mission to the world" in terms of the purpose of the mission. Here the image or concept of sacrament or sign may be usefully employed. For the Christian, Jesus Christ is the normative revelation in history of God and the purpose of the world and the meaning of its history. Christ is the final revelation of sin and of grace. This means that the present condition of this world is not what it should be (sin), nor does it have to be what it is at present; rather, by God's power (grace) the world and history can be re-created and, in the end, will be. The purpose of the Church, its mission, is to continue to "body forth" in a visible and audible way in the world that very revelation it has accepted through faith and in Jesus.

As was said earlier, this faith that underlies the Christian life becomes sign to the world in a public and corporate way precisely in its institutionalization. The notion of the Church as sign or sacrament is neither abstract nor ethereal. The Church is sign, symbol, or sacrament precisely in its visible, organized, and institutional forms in history. The Church is a sign in its institutions, in its public functions and interventions in history, in the commitment of its resources and personnel, the way its members live their lives, by the focus of its energies through its leaders, in its buildings and budgets. Moreover, in terms of the truth and credibility of the Church as mission, of its immanence and transcendence, the notion of sign and sacrament is concrete, practical, and existential; and it has a critical relevance in the sense that people both outside and inside the Church understand it when they see it and are scandalized when they do not.⁵¹

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 15 (*Documents*, pp. 602-3).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 6 (*Documents*, pp. 590-92).

⁵¹ The practical relevance of this conception of the Church as sacrament or sign can be illustrated by an example. If a large city diocese in the United States were to close forty parish schools within the city in the course of a decade, and substantially cut back its financial support to the parishes in the inner city which are poor and whose territory included a population that was largely not Catholic, and were it to express publicly that its policy was to move its support to the suburbs where its main constituency had migrated, given the general problems of the cities in this country and by the criteria envisaged here, namely, mission and active sign-bearing, such a Church would simply not be credible. As an institution, it would be an actual countersign of the Christian life. One might say that

When the Church is understood as a sign in the dynamic and functional context of its mission to the world, and when it is viewed from a concrete, existential, and historical point of view, this understanding takes on a powerful and critical significance. Negatively, it leads to the conclusion that a sign is not a sign unless it actively signifies. A Church whose nature is sign-bearing but which does not actually or actively signify what it professes becomes by definition a countersign. It evacuates Christian words of their meaning and empties them of their value. And it must be admitted that historically and concretely any Christian Church at any particular time, any Christian communion, or particular church, or local church, or religious community can become a countersign to its particular milieu and in effect lead people away from Christ. Furthermore, once the dynamism of the sign is taken seriously and viewed empirically, it follows that the institutional aspects of the Church can no longer be viewed in themselves but must be judged in the light of their efficacy for the sign-mission. Positively, this understanding, when viewed concretely and historically, means that the credibility and the truth of the Church really depend on its actual ability to exercise its transcendence within the world. The freedom, communion, transcendence, and holiness which are the marks of the Christian life will only become *real* in the Church when they are embodied concretely in it as a community of people and as an institution, so that the mission of Christ might be actually continued in a public and historical way.

Once again, the Vatican Council addressed this issue of the purpose of mission in terms of how the Church was to fulfil its mission to the world for Roman Catholicism. The world to and for which the Church is mission was viewed historically and concretely by the Council. Thus the mission of the Church is to be carried out in different ways according to the concrete situation and circumstance of the people addressed, and these will be many and varied.⁵² In many places it may not be profitable to simply expound the gospel directly and immediately. In such circumstances the Church should "bear witness to Christ by charity and works of mercy, with all patience, prudence, and great confidence."⁵³ In

the Church as an ontological sign survived in the institution because of its historical continuity with the past and through other less visible apostolic actions. And the authentic Church would certainly be alive in the community that subsisted partly within, partly beside, and partly prescinding from the institution's leadership. But as an institution called "Church," such a Church would be a scandal to many within her. And those outside this Church who were dedicated to the amelioration of the life of the poor would undoubtedly count this Church as an enemy, or at least no ally—and rightly so if this movement continued.

⁵² Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, no. 6 (*Documents*, pp. 590-92).

⁵³ *Ibid.*

this way the Council recognized that the fundamental and deepest exigency is that the Church, through the work of its members and in its official representatives and structures, become thoroughly involved in the everyday life and problems of the people, immersed in their culture, and dedicated to their needs, and all this primarily by action. Such a course obviously does not preclude preaching and accepting converts. When this happens, Christians who have a natural desire to share and communicate what they have themselves received as a gift will certainly rejoice. But the first and primary task of the Church is that of just being there as a concrete sign of the love of God for all people. This commitment to developmental work, to the work of humanization, to the simple love of one's fellow men and women is thus conceived as an essential and integral part of what has classically been understood as the evangelization process—as indeed one might expect, since in teaching this the Council added nothing to the teaching of Jesus in the parable of the Good Samaritan.⁵⁴ Moreover, it took this to be the concrete test of the credibility of the Church's message.⁵⁵

Holiness and Mission Spirituality

We must consider, finally, the faith life of the sign-bearing mission Church. Christian tradition has always maintained that there is an intimate connection between faith in God and love of neighbor. It can be argued both systematically and from Scripture that the two, if authentically possessed, merge into identity at the deepest level of the personality. The neighbor, of course, is the other, the fellow human being who, though not part of "my own" and perhaps not even "worthy" of my love, demands it of me in faith because of his own intrinsic and infinite value grounded in the common creative and accepting love of the Father. Christian faith, then, and the Christian life have a necessary and internal orientation of service outside the self and into the world of other people. In a sense, this is the empirical and this-worldly test of faith's transcendence. And it is axiomatic that a love which is not expressed in some form of action is no love at all. In the light of the problem of the Church, these absolutely fundamental principles concerning faith take on new and enormously important relevance.

Holiness or sanctity can be nothing else than this Christian life of faith led to an exceptional degree of integrity. This is something to which

⁵⁴ This was made explicit by the 1971 Synod of Bishops in the following famous sentence: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation."

⁵⁵ See Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, nos. 11-12 (*Documents*, pp. 597-99).

all Christians are called, and there can be no class distinctions at this level, no double standards of sanctity. Viewed from a concrete, existential, and historical point of view, there can be no ontological "states" or "offices" of perfection or holiness; holiness can only exist as a moral quality of a person.⁵⁶

The Church is the community of the faithful called to lead a Christian life of holiness; it is the "people of God." The Church is not in its first moment an institution. One cannot imagine a Church institution independently of a prior people of faith. Genetically and structurally, the Church is the coming together of people who in faith are grasped by God as manifested in Jesus the Christ. Institutions gradually emerged to give form to the community's life in the Spirit, as would happen in any other community. Thus this people of God is institutionalized, and sociologically it had to be. The Church as institution is the institutionalization of the Spirit-inspired faith life of the people of God. If the Church is the institutionalization of the Christian life, then the Church as corporation, identifiable community, and institution must take on the character of the action-oriented Christian love of neighbor that is internal to and constitutive of authentic faith. The understanding of the Church must be such that as an institution it is not only coherent with but also structures and nourishes the selfless Christian life of which it is the institutionalization. Reciprocally, views of holiness or Christian perfection must be influenced, indeed determined, by the understanding or theology of the Church. In other words, Christian spirituality should be ecclesial,⁵⁷ and consequently it should be mission spirituality.

The importance of this question of holiness and spirituality cannot be exaggerated in any discussion of the Church. Conceptions of holiness are as culturally determined as any other conceptions, but it often seems

⁵⁶ Regarding the Church, Hans Küng writes: "The New Testament knows nothing of institutional sanctity, of a sacred 'it'; it does not speak of a Church which invests as many of its institutions, places, times and implements as possible with the attribute 'holy.' The only kind of holiness at issue here is a completely *personal* sanctity" (*The Church* [New York, 1967] p. 325). One may agree with Küng here because of that against which he is reacting. At the same time, both his statement and our statement in the text must be qualified; for all human activity can be imitated, patterned, objectified, and institutionalized. On this basis one may speak paradoxically both of institutional grace and of institutional sin. What must be constantly recalled, however, is that all such objectifications and institutionalizations have their basic ground and stuff in human, and hence subjective and moral, activity. At the same time, precisely insofar as this human activity is routinized and objectified, it may lose both its consciously religious quality and its consciously sinful quality.

⁵⁷ Thus Gregory Baum writes: "The fellowship the Open Church creates among her members and the holiness into which she initiates them are subordinated to the transforming effect of the Christian community on the society in which it lives" (*The Credibility of the Church Today*, p. 197).

that the Church's conceptions of holiness and sanctity are still determined by dated models from the past and are not being informed by theological exigencies that are radically new.⁵⁸ Christian spirituality or piety must involve one's active participation in the world of the everyday. As a matter of fact, the vast majority of the time of the vast majority of Christians is spent immersed in the world, and this activity is not unrelated to either personal sanctity, salvation, or Christian mission. This implies the exigency today for a concept of holiness that places the Christian in the world and makes him as a Christian just as responsible for what goes on there as anyone else. Given the commandment of love of neighbor, and given our heightened awareness of people in need and the new technical ability to do something about it, Christian spirituality should examine critically and theologically those forms of Christian life and ideals of holiness that seem to involve drawing a person or community out of this world and cutting off all relations with other people. Prayer, sacramental practice, and worship itself if they are closed off from love of neighbor, mysticism if it is escapist, monasticism and other forms of religious community if they are turned inward upon themselves, suddenly appear in today's culture as ambiguous and inauthentically Christian. It cannot be presumed that union with God which involves a neglect of responsibility in this world and for this world has anything to do with Christian holiness.⁵⁹ And as far as any renewed understanding of the Church is concerned, unless the language, symbols, and understanding of the ideal Christian life change, current ecclesiology will have little impact on anyone.⁶⁰

CONCLUSION

The question of the Church today is a real one, and the problem of understanding the Church is a real problem. It has been suggested here that the problem is at the same time practical, moral, and profoundly theological; it is a problem of credibility stemming from a failure in action which is in its turn rooted in theological understanding. Relative to life in this world and responsibility for addressing the grave social

⁵⁸ One thinks of the lives of many (not all) of the saints who are presently venerated, whose total lives (as opposed to one or other aspect of them) not only fail to provide models within our culture but may also be symbolically counterproductive of the kind of spirituality demanded today.

⁵⁹ We have opened up a very complex question here. Many presuppositions are involved, such as the nature of history and eschatology (Is history continuous or discontinuous with the "end-time"?), the Christian conception of God (Is God jealous of man's constant attention or has He released the race into history in freedom as a task for responsible creativity?), the Pelagian question, and so on. Unfortunately, these questions cannot be dealt with here.

⁶⁰ See Michael C. Reilly, "Holiness and Development," *America* 133 (1975) 204-7.

issues of our time, the data would seem to indicate that being a Church member does not make any difference, or worse, the sphere of the Church protects one from having to assume responsibility for these issues. If that is the case in any particular Church, it may be better for any given person that he or she lead his or her Christian life outside and apart from that Church, and in another; for this remains a definite possibility in our pluralistic situation. It also happens that a person's ultimate convictions about reality and God can today remain profoundly Christian while one seeks a more personal identity through other forms of community and voluntary association. Or one could remain within the Church and remain as well profoundly indifferent to its institutional life. This too is a common stance, and it is becoming more common.⁶¹ What these phenomena point to is the fact that the problem of the Church today is one of credibility not only for non-Christians but also for Christians, and it can be described in distinctly political terms.⁶²

But the sphere of politics and action is not purely pragmatic. Action and behavior and responsibility and decision imply understanding. The question of the Church, therefore, is posed to theological understanding, reasoning, and judgment, and it must be posed on the most basic level of the very nature and role of the Christian life and its institutionalization in history which is the Church. But this question of the Church must be posed today in such a way that, from the very beginning, it is addressed in relation to this world, to life in it and responsibility for it. Unless that is done, the Church will be entrapped within a self-enclosed self-understanding and will ultimately be understood on the basis of a personal assurance of salvation or, even worse, in such shallow terms as "It is my home" and "I feel secure there."

Finally, I have argued that the Church has had and does possess the symbol of self-understanding that both absorbs into itself the contemporary critique of the Church and responds to it confidently in a uniquely

⁶¹ An individualistic faith-life is, of course, both "unnatural," because of the social nature of the human person, and contrary to the inner dynamism of Christian faith itself. A person who leaves the Church may be deserting precisely the mission of the Church. It is for these reasons that the phenomenon may be seen as a critique and should be so disturbing for the churches.

⁶² This statement does not entail a reduction of the religious to the moral sphere. The two are distinct but cannot be separated. Only to the degree that one sees how closely these two spheres are related will it be appreciated why the root of the crisis of the Church is moral and why this also involves a theological problem of understanding. I have used the practical problems of behavior and credibility as the point of entry into the theological problem of the Church precisely because, on the one hand, decision and action cannot be separated from understanding, and on the other, inversely, theology does make a difference for Church policy and decision. One must pass from sociological and political data to the deeper theological issues.

traditional and Christic way. That symbol is "mission."⁶³ As was the mission of Christ, so the Church is sent to the world and for the world, especially the dispossessed, to help make all things new in the name of Christ.

COMMENTS ON ROGER D. HAIGHT'S ARTICLE

In a joint issue on Church a question will inevitably emerge: How would the two systematic positions on "Why the Church?" respond to each other? This comment attempts an answer to the legitimate request, and thus presupposes some acquaintance with my article "Trinitarian Love as Ground of the Church."

Haight's choice of "mission" as symbol for understanding the Church not only responds to an empirical tendency of our day to "Show me," but also calls the Church to a much-needed conversion from complacency and institutional in-turning to examine itself for signs of real self-transcendence in the form of service to the world. He takes the world seriously, both as a place where God's grace acts and as being in need of the Church's service of love. On all of these points there is basic agreement between us.

The difference between our two positions appears both in our points of departure and in our underlying philosophies. Haight begins with the problematic the modern world gives us—pragmatic, empirical, aware of historical relativity. Scripture is appealed to as responding to that problematic. In my view, our present culture not only provides new possibilities of understanding Scripture; it is also called into question by Scripture. In some ways we always fall short of God's revelation in Christ, and we have to look to that source to judge even our own time. As I see it, present-day inadequacy is manifested in our very tendency to think only functionally and empirically, with the result that permanent commitments—whether in marriage or the churches—are being progressively

⁶³ Michael A. Fahey, S.J., in "The Mission of the Church: To Divinize or Humanize?" (address to the national convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America, June 1976; will appear soon in the *Proceedings*), assumes a concrete and realistic perspective, examines the shifts in the meaning of the term "mission" through history, and reacts against the sudden escalation in its usage over the past couple of decades together with its inflation to include too many different roles for the Church in the world. His point is that specific tasks or any single activity among many should not be identified with *the* mission of the Church. It would be better to speak of the "tasks" of the Church. He then constructively explores the new meaning contained in the idea of the *munus* of the Church, a term employed in Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes*. He concludes that the Church has several areas of responsibility outside itself to the non-Christ-confessing world even after the gospel has been announced. These areas correspond to the "integrational, prophetic, and eschatological" functions or dimensions of the Church. I would agree that "mission" can be and has been abused and cheapened, especially when it is used in everyday descriptive and inspirational language about the activities or agenda of the Church. However, as a theological symbol that opens up meaning and mediates understanding, it can help to link the qualities of Vatican II's *munus* with the New Testament and tradition, can help to ground those qualities therein. On this level, and for this reason, I think Fahey would agree that the symbol should not be abandoned but rather explored even further.

undermined because of our inability to face the inevitable dark and unrewarding times such commitments entail. If Christ has won a final victory, the Church's participation in that victory must somehow be valid for all time. How it will be lived out in any age certainly changes, but the basic structure of committed communal love remains constant. In my view, the most pressing need of the Church today is to rediscover that spiritual groundwork as the basis for any solid missionary work.

As for our philosophies, Haight appeals to empiricism and functionalism as most suitable for today's mentality. My position looks to empirical data, especially that of depth psychology, but is unabashedly ontological—and, indeed, with an interpersonal ontology. Empiricism thinks from the outside in, looks for marks of credibility and functional effect. An interpersonal ontology thinks from the inside out, to discover the energy sources from which the outer effect will be lasting and fruitful. Both are needed. Without looking to outward effect, inner dynamics will stagnate in mere process; but unless the interpersonal dynamic is attended to, our social action will collapse through lack of staying power. Contrary to Haight, my view of our present problem is that inner dynamics are most neglected, and that unless we rediscover spiritual growth and community, a mission-oriented approach is in danger of perpetuating our present alienation from self-understanding, much as the Protestant churches are discovering the inadequacy of a merely social gospel in our day.

It is the difference in philosophies that determines our different views of finality in the Church. Haight sees one overarching finality, that of mission. I have affirmed a double finality, like that of marriage. As conjugal love and procreation of children are both seen as ends of marriage, so I see Christian community and mission as double ends of the Church. Haight's view corresponds to a functional philosophy; it has the efficiency of one goal that can clearly direct decisions. My view follows from an interpersonal ontology in which persons are never means to an end. Since our union with Christ and community is already an end—much like the love of spouses—it cannot be subordinated to mission, even though its authenticity is revealed in the desire to communicate this love to others. A Trinitarian view is at home with such a complex finality, since it reflects the different processions in the Trinity. These different positions are not without implications for decisions. For me, the Church does have a mission to itself, its own conversion and growth. Hence a spirituality serving deeper relation to God—even monastic spirituality—may ever be needed to empower the other finality of mission. Further, a double finality is not solely focused on the transcendent kingdom; it celebrates the present kingdom, and out of this celebration is motivated to give with joy what it has found. This view sees in the community a love that “never ends,” so that all attention is not simply focused on the “not yet” of mission.

Thus I see “mission” as but one aspect of the complex goal of the Church. If the total goal is not kept in mind, it seems to me we will be consigned to a recurrent dialectic from one neglected aspect to another, without being rooted in an adequate overview. “Mission” itself will differ according to particular needs. The present need is most likely what Haight sees—to extend the service of God's

love to the oppressed and neglected. But liberation itself is only a beginning. One needs to build committed community and to transform the world in final submission to God. The world may reject this, since a God-centered, communal view demands the cross, but the Church cannot tailor its call to what the world is ready to accept. The Church's call may be as mysterious as that of a Mother Teresa of Calcutta, which calls the world out of its own self-centered ends to a recognition that beyond all, and relativizing all, is the eternal community with God and fellow believers that all our hopes are grounded in and foreshadow.

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