

FORMS OF ECCLESIALITY: THE ANALOGICAL CHURCH

T. HOWLAND SANKS, S.J.

Jesuit School of Theology, Berkeley, Calif

MOST THEOLOGIANS today would accept the thesis that there is an ongoing dialectical relationship between theology and the lived experience of the community. Without a certain amount of experience theological reflection is not possible, or at least is not grounded in reality; without ongoing theological reflection the life of the community lacks focus and direction. Thus the theology encapsulated in the documents of Vatican II was the product of the years of experience prior to the Council and at the same time unleashed new possibilities for the life of the community after the Council. For example, the renewed emphasis on the local church and an awareness of cultural diversity stimulated the further development of national and regional episcopal conferences, which now requires further theological reflection. Similarly, the emphasis on the Church as the People of God and on service in and for the world fostered the growth of smaller, more personally oriented base communities. This phenomenon has led us to further theological reflection on the more familiar forms of church organization such as the territorial parish.

After almost 25 years of postconciliar experience, it is to be expected that we should be examining the theological bases and consequences of these ecclesial forms and structures. Hence the recent working document (*instrumentum laboris*) on the "Theological and Juridical Status of Episcopal Conferences" circulated by the Congregation for Bishops is the beginning of a more developed theology of these conferences than was possible at the close of the Council.¹ Similarly, the experience of the growth and development of the *comunidades eclesiales de base* has resulted in a number of recent studies on these communities.² The changes and challenges of the postconciliar experience in the life of the parish have prompted the almost-complete study of the parish in the United States

¹ An English translation was circulated to the American bishops in February 1988.

² E.g., Marcello de C. Azevedo, S.J., *Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil: The Challenge of a New Way of Being Church* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, 1987); Guillermo Cook, *The Expectation of the Poor: Latin American Basic Ecclesial Communities in Protestant Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985); and the earlier controversial work by Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesio genesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986).

sponsored by the University of Notre Dame.³

The experience of these emerging forms of ecclesiality, or of new ways of being church, warrants further theological reflection at this time. I would like to take up each of these topics, review the issues and questions involved, and then suggest that there are some modes of thinking about them which will be more fruitful than others. Put simply, my thesis is that the Church is and always has been an analogical notion, that the various ways in which the Church has taken on historical concreteness have been conditioned by historical particularities and therefore were partly alike and partly different—analogous rather than univocal.⁴ If we approach the contemporary issues in ecclesiology with this in mind we may realize that new forms of ecclesiality are more in keeping with the Catholic tradition than some would suggest.

Hence I will (1) outline the problems raised by these new forms of ecclesiality and (2) suggest how analogical thinking may help us to approach them constructively.

BASIC ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES

Although there is diversity in origin, in structure, and in aim, there is enough in common to talk about the phenomenon of basic ecclesial communities (BECs) as a whole. Dating from the mid-1960s, the growth of small groups of lay persons, usually about 15 to 30 in number, in mostly rural but also very poor urban areas has spread rapidly in Central and South America (primarily in Brazil, where the number is estimated to be as high as 80,000) but also in Africa, Asia, Europe, and to a lesser extent the United States. Typically they involve the study of Scripture and its application to daily life, a conscious integration of faith with the rest of life, mutual support and help in the vicissitudes of daily life amid grinding poverty, and some degree of social and political activism. Although the BECs did not arise spontaneously but usually at the instigation of a pastoral agent, priest or religious woman, they are typically led by lay people once they are organized. In some places, e.g. Brazil, they were deliberately fostered by the bishops as a pastoral strategy to compensate for lack of ordained clergy and for the vast geographical extent

³ Joseph Gremillion and Jim Castelli, *The Emerging Parish: The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Life since Vatican II* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); and Jay P. Dolan, ed., *The American Catholic Parish: A History From 1850 to the Present* (2 vols.: New York: Paulist, 1987). These are sociological and historical studies rather than theological ones.

⁴ I had been using the notion in teaching for several years before finding it used by José Miguez Bonino, "Fundamental Questions in Ecclesiology," in Sergio Torres and John Eagelson, eds., *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981) 148.

of the parishes. They were not formed in opposition to the territorial parish but were viewed as subunits within the parish. In other places, e.g. Europe, they were the result of frustration with the parish and were seen as a form of protest against the hierarchical church structure.⁵

The very rapidity of growth and the number of such communities itself makes them a subject for theological reflection. Moreover, they seem to have been remarkably successful at reintegrating faith and daily life, at deepening the spiritual development of the lay persons involved, and at stimulating both evangelization and activity on behalf of social justice. Further, they have given hope to, and are a sign of hope for, their members and those around them in the situations of direst poverty. At the same time, because they are relatively small and closed groups without the direct supervision of a pastor or ordained cleric and are usually involved in some political activity, they have aroused the suspicion both of hierarchical authorities in the Church and of political authorities in the secular realm. Warnings of sectarianism, isolation, and the loss of any historical sense of belonging to the Great Church, as well as reducing the spiritual to the political, have been leveled at them.⁶ More to the point here and most fundamentally, the question has been raised as to whether or not these BECs can be called "church." Are they merely natural groupings, or a passing manifestation of the postmodern quest for community? Or are they, as Boff and others have claimed, a new way of being church, a church of the people, from below, a true expression of the Church as People of God? Do they pose a challenge or a threat to other forms of church such as parish or diocese, and to a hierarchically ordered church in general? Can they be translated in some form to first-world and predominantly middle-class countries such as the U.S., or are they only possible among the very poor? These are some of the major issues raised by the BECs' experience during the last 25 years or so.

It is not my intention to try to settle any or all of the above issues. Rather, I want to suggest that answers will be easier to come by if we think analogically rather than in terms of either/or. How this is the case should be clearer after I discuss the other two issues mentioned above.

⁵ For details on which these generalizations are based, see Azevedo, Cook, Torres and Eagelson cited above, and *Pro Mundi Vita Bulletin* 81 (April 1980). For base communities in the U.S., see *Comunidades eclesiales de base: Experiencia en los Estados Unidos*, by the National Secretariat and Hispanic Teams (Liguori, Mo.: Liguori, 1980), and a series of reports on individual base communities among Hispanics under the general title *Hispanic Evangelization*, published by the NCCB Committee on Evangelization from 1980-81.

⁶ See Miguez Bonino, "Fundamental Questions" 149.

NOTRE DAME STUDY OF THE U.S. PARISH

The most direct and dramatic effect of the changes fostered by Vatican II was felt at the parish level. New expectations of the role of the pastor and of the laity, shared responsibility, a greater communitarian spirit in the liturgy, dramatic changes in other forms of piety and paraliturgical practices such as novenas, Benediction, weekly confession, etc., all coalesced to challenge the traditional parish structure as a form of being church as "church" was understood in Vatican II. As mentioned above, the BECs arose at least in some places as a direct response to the failure of the parish structure due to a shortage of ordained clergy and the vast territorial expanse of many parishes. These last two factors were not verified in the U.S., but dissatisfaction with the experience of parish life did precipitate some experimental alternatives such as "underground" and "floating" parishes. The experience of the charismatic movement and of cursillos provided some other experiences of "community." In addition, the rapid rise in the educational level of Roman Catholics in the U.S. after World War II had its impact on the average parish, manifested in higher expectations of preaching and competence in managing the parish.

Most Catholics in the U.S. accepted and approved of the changes prompted by Vatican II but felt that there had been inadequate educational preparation for them.⁷ An opportunity to raise the level of theological education to match the level of general education of the American Catholic was missed and a deeper understanding of the changes was not provided. But in general the parishes in the U.S. did adapt to and adopt the changes stimulated by Vatican II. By the beginning of the 1980s, however, it was clear that some systematic study of parish life in the U.S. was needed. Stimulated by the U.S. bishops' 1980 statement *The Parish: A People, a Mission, a Structure*, an interdisciplinary study sponsored by the University of Notre Dame was launched in 1982. A series of individual reports on various aspects of parish life has been published since 1984 and continues to the present. A recent summary presentation of the results, *The Emerging Parish*, was published in 1987. The Notre Dame study was a comprehensive, social-scientific survey of parishioners' beliefs, practices, and communal faith experiences, as well as a study of the organizational structure and decision-making practices of the communities.⁸ It was not, nor was it intended to be, a theological reflection on the parish, but it does provide some data for such a reflection.

⁷ George Gallup Jr. and Jim Castelli, *The American Catholic People: Their Beliefs, Practices, and Values* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1987) 49.

⁸ Gremillion and Castelli, *The Emerging Parish* 6.

While I am not attempting to summarize its conclusions, the Notre Dame study did find that “despite some problem areas, the post-Vatican II Catholic parish in the United States is basically healthy. It plays a central role in the lives of its parishioners and continues to change to accommodate a changing people and a changing church.”⁹ The study emphasizes the high level of satisfaction of the “core Catholics” surveyed with their parishes in meeting their spiritual and social needs and in providing a real sense of community. They were equally pleased with the liturgical reforms brought about by Vatican II and with the increase in social-service programs and activities on behalf of peace and justice.

Despite the overall positive state of the parishes according to the Notre Dame study, some problem areas were recognized. Only in passing does the study mention one of the “dominant realities of parish life today,” the growing shortage of priests. It also points out that for a large minority, “possibly 40 percent,” a real community does not exist in the parish, and that 46 percent seldom speak with the pastor in an average month.¹⁰ The study also mentions the fragmentation of the parish along interest and age lines, reporting that the two activities which bring people together are Mass and bingo.¹¹

The Notre Dame study provides the best data we have on the current state of parishes in the United States. It does not, however, give a complete picture of “Catholic Life since Vatican II,” as the subtitle suggests. It does not include nominal or alienated Catholics, nor Hispanic Catholics, but by design dealt only with “core Catholics,” defined as “non-Hispanic Catholics who were registered members of parishes.”¹² Although this was legitimate for the purposes of the study, it is not surprising that those who are registered members of parishes and not Hispanic Catholics are relatively satisfied with parish life. Those who are not satisfied or who are positively alienated do not register as members of a parish but remain Catholics nonetheless. If we use the numbers supplied by the study, there are approximately 15 million Catholics not registered in parishes. Further, there are approximately 13 million Hispanic Catholics. And so we are talking about perhaps 28 million Catholics not represented in the Notre Dame study of parish life. I repeat, this was legitimate for the purposes of the study; but it does obscure at least some problems with the parish form of ecclesiality. We know, e.g., that a large number of Hispanic Catholics have been enrolled in evangelical and pentecostal churches in the United States. Apparently

⁹ Ibid. 200.

¹⁰ Ibid. 60.

¹¹ Ibid. 70.

¹² Ibid. 30. Hispanics were excluded for “language and cultural reasons.”

they did not find their religious needs met in the Catholic parishes available to them. We also know that a fair number of Catholics attend Sunday liturgies at other than parish sites, such as Newman Centers, college and university chapels, and churches noted for their liturgies.¹³

There was speculation a few years ago that the territorial parish as we have known it since the Council of Trent was likely to disappear in the not too distant future. The Notre Dame study may have been fueled in part by such speculation, but it strongly suggests that the parish is likely to be here for the foreseeable future. It may not, however, be like the parish as we now know it. In the second part of this article I will suggest that the notion of "parish" is itself an analogical one. But first let us take up the other new form of ecclesiality which has emerged since Vatican II, the national and regional episcopal conferences.

EPISCOPAL CONFERENCES

The third issue in current ecclesiology which, I suggest, could benefit from an analogical mode of thinking is that of national/regional episcopal conferences. Although they had their origins earlier (e.g., in Brazil in 1952), episcopal conferences whether national or regional were greatly encouraged by Vatican II. There they were defined as follows:

An episcopal conference is a kind of council in which the bishops of a given nation or territory jointly exercise their pastoral office by way of promoting that greater good which the Church offers mankind, especially through forms and programs of the apostolate which are fittingly adapted to the circumstances of the age.¹⁴

The Council recognized that such co-operation among bishops for the common good and for the universal mission entrusted to the apostles has existed from the earliest centuries of the Church in the form of synods and provincial and plenary councils, and desires that such "flourish with new vigor." The Council gave some general instructions about membership and decision-making in these councils but did not attempt to settle all questions. The 1983 Code of Canon Law gave juridical status to the conferences, calling them "a permanent institution" (can. 447) and providing further specifications for their operation. After 20 years of experience the extraordinary meeting of the Synod of Bishops in 1985 called for further exploration of the "theological status" of episcopal conferences, with particular attention to the problem of their doctrinal

¹³ E.g., at St. Francis Cathedral in Oakland, Calif., which has a national reputation for its outstanding liturgies, 40% of the attendees come from outside the territorial limits of the parish.

¹⁴ *Christus Dominus* 38.

authority. It was in response to this suggestion that the recent Vatican document referred to above was prepared.

The issues discussed in this working document are the collegiality of episcopal conferences, their relationship to both individual bishops and to the universal Church or, more specifically, the apostolic see, and their magisterial authority. As has been pointed out, the document is inconsistent and even contradictory on the question of the collegiality of episcopal conferences. Indeed, it was the disparaging use of "analogical" in the text which prompted this present reflection.

After acknowledging that "Episcopal collegiality is basically the same ecclesial communion expressed at the level of the pastors" (p. 3), and that "the concrete exercise of episcopal collegiality must serve the solidarity of *communio*," the document distinguishes between various "actualizations" of collegiality: "those which involve the college as such with its head, from those which gather the bishops in the name of their pastoral concern, but not in their universality." The first expresses "the exercise of collegiality in the strict sense and involves the *actio collegialis*," but the second, "generated by *affectus collegialis*," is only "collegiality according to an analogical, theologically improper, use" (p. 6). The first is "effective" collegiality, while the second is "affective collegiality even if one cannot exclude some effectus." Collegiality in the strict sense is actualized only in the two instances mentioned in *Lumen gentium* 22: in an ecumenical council or when the bishops spread throughout the world are summoned to collegiate action by the pope. At the end of this section of the document, however, it says that "it is clear that this real collegiality urges the bishops to express their coresponsibility for the ruling of the universal Church via certain organs, such as the synod of bishops, of which is recognized *true, but partial, collegiality*" (p. 7).

Further on, the document says again that "Those acts carried out within episcopal structures, such as the synod and the national conferences, have a certain *partial character of collegiality*" (p. 10). And later still the document says: "It follows that conferences express collegiality, *but only in an analogical sense*" (p. 12).

It is not my desire to attempt to reconcile these seemingly contradictory affirmations about the collegiality of episcopal conferences, but to dispute that an "analogical sense" is theologically improper or not true. Let us look briefly at the other two issues raised by the document before coming to that conclusion.

The concern of the document about the relationship of episcopal conferences to individual bishops and to the universal Church, Rome in particular, is stated more in the form of cautions than theological affirmations. It points out that the individual bishops are "*iure divino*

ordinary and proper pastors of the particular churches over which they have been set, and vicars of Christ in these: such titles do not apply to the episcopal conference" (p. 14). It warns against the conferences becoming "bureaucratic decision-making structures" or "coercing the psychological freedom of the bishops," as well as the possibility of the conferences claiming "undue autonomy from the apostolic see." It cautions further against "an overemphasis on the particular church, which . . . seems to ignore the ontological and historical priority of the universal Church" (p. 15). It is concerned about the Petrine primacy, understood as *plenitudo potestatis*, being based on the "primacy of the one and universal Church over particular and local churches."

The third issue, that of the magisterial authority of episcopal conferences, was raised both by Rome and by individual bishops in the U.S. in the light of the recent pastoral letters of the U.S. Bishops' Conference on nuclear weapons and the economy (and more recently the statement on the pastoral care of AIDS patients). The Roman document is even more confusing on this issue. After quoting canon 753, which refers to bishops teaching "individually, or gathered together in episcopal conferences or in particular councils" as "authentic instructors and teachers of the faith for Christ's faithful," it comes to the amazing conclusion that "Therefore the episcopal conferences do not, as such, properly speaking possess the *munus magisterii*" (p. 18). It is clear that the document is neither complete nor definitive on any of these issues. It is, I hope, merely initiating discussion.¹⁵

As indicated above, it is not my intention to propose solutions to any of the issues raised by this post-Vatican II form of ecclesiality, but rather to make us conscious of the mode of thought with which we approach these theological reflections.

THE ANALOGICAL IMAGINATION APPLIED

When, in his 1977 presidential address to the Catholic Theological Society of America, David Tracy first proposed his description of the distinctive character of Catholic Christianity as the "analogical imagination," most Catholic theologians responded with an enthusiastic yes, instinctively recognizing it to be true. In his magisterial 1981 book by that title, Tracy explicated the implications of such a mode of thinking for foundational and systematic theologies in a pluralistic context. Yet it does not seem that we have exercised our Catholic analogical imagina-

¹⁵ Initial reactions to the working draft from some American theologians and canonists were offered in *America*, March 19, 1988. An international conference on this topic, scheduled prior to the circulation of the document, was held in Salamanca in January 1988 (cf. the brief report in *Commonweal*, Feb. 26, 1988).

tions on current theological issues.

What does Tracy mean by the Catholic analogical imagination and how might we apply it to the three issues in current ecclesiology? In 1977 Tracy put it simply: "In more familiar and traditional language, analogy articulates both the significant differences and similarities between human beings and the rest of life in the cosmos and, above all, between human beings and God as disclosed in Jesus Christ."¹⁶ He further distinguished it from equivocal and univocal language and from the dialectical imagination. For the analogical imagination "there is always some order to be found in reality, and the key to that order will be found in some focal meaning (some prime analogate). . . ." That focal meaning provides the clue which enables one to envision ordered relationships in reality. For Catholics that focal meaning may be found in the Incarnation. For the dialectical mind, on the other hand, there is really no such hope for order and one must be suspicious of any claims to a vision of the whole.¹⁷

I would contrast the analogical mode of thinking with a dichotomous mode, which stresses that relationships are either/or: either completely alike or completely different. This mode of thinking does not see proportional relationships between different entities or structures but stresses only the differences. It can only replicate or repeat its focal meaning rather than allow that focal meaning to illuminate new experiences or structures.

To Base Communities

How would an analogical imagination approach the theological issues raised by our experience of the *comunidades eclesiales de base*? First, if the prime analogate for being church is a community of disciples gathered in the name of Jesus—"Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am also present" (Mt 18:20)—then there would be no question of whether or not the base communities are truly "church." They clearly are, and they are analogous to other forms of church in historical experience. They are a community (*koinōnia*) gathered in the name of Jesus (*memoria domini*) in service to one another and the rest of the world (*diakonia*). The fact that they are small in size, participatory in operation, and led by lay men and women makes for differences from some other forms of church, but these need not deny them the title of

¹⁶ David Tracy, "Presidential Address: The Catholic Analogical Imagination," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 32 (1977) 234-44, and *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

¹⁷ Tracy, "Presidential Address" 236-37.

“church.” Of course, they must remain in communion with the rest of the Church and with the local bishop as the symbol of unity in the Church. If such a grouping does not isolate itself and become a sect, then whether they gather in the house of a wealthy Roman matron (house church) or a large public building (basilica) or a monastery in the desert, we still have the Church of Jesus Christ. “Church” is and always has been an analogical notion, as its use in the New Testament verifies.

If we think of church as analogical, the question of base communities eventually replacing parishes as a form of ecclesiality evanesces. We can have both/and rather than either/or. Boff and other enthusiastic proponents of base communities may indeed speak of a church arising from the grass roots, but this need not imply the withering away of the parish structure.

To Parishes

In contrast to base communities and episcopal conferences, the parish has a long history. Etymologically, the Greek word *paroikos* meant “neighbor” or one living in a foreign country with some rights but without citizenship. Thus the word was applied to Abraham and his people and to the Israelite community in Egypt. The early Christian community applied the notion to itself, with the eschatological connotation that they have no lasting place in this world but their true home is in heaven (Acts 7:6; Eph 2:19; 1 Pet 1:17; 2:11, et al.). After A.D. 150 the term denoted the individual community in the here-and-now, and by the end of the third or beginning of the fourth century it was descriptive of an outward ecclesiastical organization, usually what we today would call a diocese. The territorial limits of a local church corresponded to Roman provinces, with a central city, the location of the bishop, and the surrounding territory forming this local unit. In the fifth and sixth centuries in France and Spain, rural churches with a resident priest came to be called *parochiae*.¹⁸ During the Middle Ages these territorial churches were paralleled by the *ecclesiae propriae*, or churches constructed by local nobles on their property and at their expense, and this system was officially recognized at the Synod of Frankfurt (794) and by Pope Eugene II at a Roman synod in 826.¹⁹ Another alternative to the territorial parish developed with the preaching orders of the Franciscans and Dominicans in the 13th century. Diocesan priests resisted their encroachment and insisted that the faithful frequent the parish church. The real organiza-

¹⁸ Casiano Floristan, *The Parish—Eucharistic Community* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Fides, 1964) 17 ff.

¹⁹ W. Croce, S.J., “The History of the Parish,” in Hugo Rahner, S.J., ed., *The Parish: From Theology to Practice* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1958) 16.

tion of the parish apostolate, as we have come to know it, came only gradually after the Council of Trent.²⁰

My point here is not to trace the history of the territorial parish but merely to point out that it has deep roots in history and that the parish itself is an analogous concept: its various embodiments are somewhat alike and somewhat different. Its early eschatological connotation was lost when Christians became very much at home and no longer "foreigners" in the Roman empire. At the same time the Church adopted the administrative format of the empire and came to use its territorial division as the basis of church organization into dioceses and provinces. Geography was the basis or principle of this organization.

But geography has not been the only principle on which the Church has organized communities. Karl Rahner pointed out some years ago that "the parochial principle has never governed alone in the *history* of the Church's pastoral ministry. The Apostles themselves had no territory as the limit of their commission and work."²¹ And he goes on to mention the wandering apostles, the monasteries, the missionary migration of monks, the mendicant orders, the sodalities and confraternities and other forms of "extraparochial" ministry.

As we know, even currently not all parishes are territorial. The Notre Dame study reports that 87% of parishes in the U.S. are territorial, but 11% are national or ethnic. In contrast to the 1917 Code, the 1983 Code of Canon Law defines a parish as "a definite community of the Christian faithful established on a stable basis within a particular church" (can. 515) and says only that "As a general rule a parish is to be territorial" (can. 518). Hence other bases for community, such as language, nationality, and same vocation or work, are allowed for, as they have always been. Rahner refers to these as other principles of "societalization."²²

The notion of parish, then, is not univocal but analogous. Can we not, then, extend a mode of analogical thought to the various forms of ecclesiality? Is there any reason not to consider base ecclesial communities as much "church" as we consider a parish to be "church"? And might we not imagine other forms of ecclesiality? I fear that the relative satisfaction in the U.S. with the changes in the parish since Vatican II pointed out by the Notre Dame study may stifle our imaginations and lull us into a sense of complacency about the present status of the parochial form of church. The study surveys how the parish as it now stands is functioning, but it does not consider what an ideal form of

²⁰ Ibid. 19.

²¹ Karl Rahner, "Peaceful Reflections on the Parochial Principle," *Theological Investigations* 2 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1963) 307 ff.

²² Karl Rahner, "Theology of the Parish," in Hugo Rahner, *The Parish* 33.

church for our time and place might be. There is no utopian ideal against which to measure the parish theologically. Participant satisfaction is not a theological criterion.

Our theological reflection on the experience of both ecclesial communities and of the changing parish since Vatican II should not begin with a univocal notion of what church is or what a parish is, but rather from the mission of the Church in each given time and place. Historically, it is clear that the Christian community has embodied itself in a variety of forms in response to the needs of the society and of the Church's conception of its mission in that society. Parker Palmer suggests that this was often in reaction to the larger society. He writes:

The call to community is constant, but the form the church community takes depends on how the church assesses its surroundings. Community tends to form in *reaction* to the larger society. Our image of community is, in microcosm, what we think the macrocosm should be but is not. The early church was a highly committed cadre for the succor and support of a minority persecuted by a hostile society. Under Constantine, Christianity received social sanction and support, and the church community became synonymous with the body politic. In the early middle ages, in the midst of cultural decline, the church took monastic form, becoming a community of withdrawal to preserve an endangered tradition.²³

After Vatican II the Church in Latin American felt free to assess its surroundings quite differently than the churches in the North Atlantic community or those of other regions of the globe. The rise of BECs is a form of ecclesiality in reaction to that assessment.

In some places we have seen the base communities become a revitalizing force within the parish structure. In the U.S. we have the experience of RENEW programs giving birth to small groups within the parish which continue to gather for prayer, reflection, and social action long after the RENEW program has ended.

While affirming the above, however, I suggest that we should not be lulled into complacency by the Notre Dame study's report of the relative satisfaction of "core Catholics" with their post-Vatican II experience of the U.S. parish. Azevedo provides an example of the analogical imagination applied to this area when he suggests:

There might be one way to satisfy this juridical need (which is well met by the present parochial structure) if parishes should turn out not to be viable as community units of evangelization. That whole communal dimension of faith and life could be turned over to working BEC's, and registration centers could be set up in line with present-day parish boundaries. These centers would house ecclesiastical documents relating to individuals in a specific area, serving a

²³ Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers* (New York: Crossroad, 1986) 118.

function similar to that of civil and voting registries. Evangelization, catechesis, and liturgical worship would be carried out in terms of smaller, more personalized units. Here the BEC's could serve as a valid *modus operandi*.²⁴

Whether or not this is the direction in which parishes evolve, we should recognize that many parishes in urban and suburban areas are in fact already "A Company of Strangers," to borrow the title of Palmer's book. The Notre Dame study revealed that 29% of core Catholics "did not have a single one of their five closest friends living within the parish, 14 percent had one close friend, 17 percent had two," and so on.²⁵ And how often is the person to whom the greeting of "Peace" is extended a complete stranger? Surely this cannot be the ideal form of the community called church.

If we think with an analogical imagination, then, we need not envision BECs as a threat to the parish, nor need we think in terms of either base communities or of parish and claim that only one or the other is church exclusively. Neither must we be constrained to maintain the present form of parish. We can imagine other forms of ecclesiality which will have some similarities with and some differences from the parish as we know it presently. We are aware that it has not always been this way historically. All the various forms of ecclesiality have been conditioned by the circumstances and needs of the time. The forms we develop for our time are no less church for that reason.

To Episcopal Conferences

This analogical imagination should also help in our theological evaluation of the national and regional episcopal conferences. We have seen that the Vatican document seems to waffle on the very use of analogy when considering the question of the collegiality of these conferences. At one point the document explicitly says that the conferences are an actualization of collegiality "according to an analogical, theologically improper, use," and later on says that "Conferences express collegiality, but only in an analogical sense" (see above). I respectfully submit that in the Roman Catholic tradition an analogical use is definitely not "theologically improper" and that *all* expressions of collegiality are analogous (the universal being the prime analogate).

Tracy pointed out that "Analogical language can be found as the predominant language employed by Catholic theologians from Justin Martyr, Augustine, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, to Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan."²⁶ He then pointed out that Vatican I

²⁴ Azevedo, *Basic Ecclesial Communities* 64-65.

²⁵ Gremillion and Castelli, *The Emerging Parish* 59.

²⁶ Tracy, "Presidential Address" 237.

also describes theology as the partial, incomplete, *analogous but real* understanding of the mysteries of the Catholic faith. The authors of the Vatican document on episcopal conferences seem to be unaware of this tradition. To recognize that collegiality is actualized on different levels and in various forms is a creative application of the Catholic tradition and of the analogical imagination. The same could be said about the exercise of the teaching authority of the bishops: whether on the universal levels mentioned in *Lumen gentium* or on the local, national, or regional levels, these are analogous exercises of magisterial authority in the Church. None of them need be disparaged or discredited, and all have long historical traditions behind them in various but analogous forms.

To summarize: When reflecting theologically on the post-Vatican II experiences of new forms of ecclesiality, the BECs, the parishes, or the national and regional episcopal conferences, we need to remember that the Catholic tradition is indeed characterized by the analogical imagination. "Church" is and always has been an analogical notion, and the forms in which it has been embodied are historically conditioned but analogously related one to another. This means that there will be differences within similarities, but then that is precisely how the focal meaning of Catholic Christianity, the Incarnation, has enabled us to envision or imagine all of reality.