


Relationality and Intersubjectivity within a Socially Oriented Metaphysics: A Note on Ecclesiology

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Abstract

Given increased attention to the themes of relationality and intersubjectivity in contemporary Christian systematic theology, the author argues that these terms are best understood within the context of a new socially ordered metaphysics in which human beings enjoy a richer life through active participation in various forms of community life. He then applies this analysis to the life of the church.

Keywords

church, ecclesiology, Pope Francis, intersubjectivity, metaphysics, panentheism, systems theory, Whitehead

Relationality and intersubjectivity are terms frequently used in contemporary systematic theology. Both terms presuppose a more socially oriented approach to reality, a new awareness of the interconnectedness of everything with everything else in this world. Likewise, contemporary trinitarian theology is being rethought in a more communitarian context. The divine persons are increasingly depicted as engaged in intersubjective relations both with one another and with all their creatures. Yet, is this new communitarian approach to the God–world relationship defensible not simply as an apt figure of speech in informal conversation, but

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philosophically and theologically in a strictly academic context? Could intersubjectivity, for example, be the paradigm or governing structure for a new evolutionary metaphysics that would emphasize the way in which physical reality is corporately organized?¹ Every entity is an ongoing unity of dynamically interrelated parts or members. Not just larger corporate realities such as human communities and physical environments but individual entities, even atoms and molecules, would be corporately organized insofar as each would be an ongoing unity of dynamically interrelated parts or members. Could the interrelated concepts of intersubjectivity and reciprocal causality among constituent parts or members of various systems be the key factors in a new understanding of the Christian God–world relationship in which the doctrine of the Trinity would be both the ontological source and the prime analogate or paradigm for the way that the world is corporately organized?

Keeping in mind the tentative character of this hypothesis, I propose that the concept of *intersubjectivity* (intersubjective relations between individual entities) rather than the Aristotelian concept of *substance*² should be regarded as the foundation of a new metaphysics for the explanation of physical reality within a trinitarian God–world relationship. For, given a systems- or process-oriented understanding of physical reality in terms of hierarchically ordered corporate entities (systems of existence and activity among individual entities at various levels of existence and activity within nature), philosophers of religion would have at hand a new socially oriented worldview that takes into account the evolutionary character of life in this world and yet preserves traditional belief in the triune God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of the cosmic process. Likewise, a systems-oriented metaphysics might be of considerable value in bringing more into focus the reciprocal relationship between the bishop of Rome and the Roman Catholic college of bishops, on the one hand, and the baptized members of the church, on the other hand. All members of the church with their ministries and gifts exist in the Body of Christ, local and worldwide, so as to identify the church as a flourishing life-system as well as an authoritative institutional entity. Still, the balance between the two groups never stays precisely the same as time goes on.

This article, accordingly, will be divided into three parts. In the first part I develop my understanding of a metaphysics based on the paradigm of universal intersubjectivity, namely, that all entities are either themselves subjects of experience in dynamic interrelation or have constituent parts or members that are dynamically interrelated subjects of experience. In the second part of the article, I set forth the implications of this new systems-oriented metaphysics for Christian systematic theology, in particular ecclesiology. Finally, in a brief third part, I offer some comments on how the spirit of

1. See Thomas F. O'Meara, OP, "Community as Primal Reality," *Theological Studies* 78 (2017): 435–36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563917698559>. O'Meara bases his conclusions about community as a primal reality on recent empirical data from astronomy and astrophysics as well as his own understanding of God as Trinity, namely, as three dynamically interrelated divine persons whose unified field of activity also includes the world of creation.
2. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Hippocrates G. Apostle (Grinnell, IA: Peripatetic, 1979), 1025; 1038b.

Vatican II seems to reflect this reality of the church as both an institutional entity with a central authority and an ongoing life-system that requires the active participation of all its members in different ways.

A Metaphysics Based on Universal Intersubjectivity

My guide in laying out the parameters of a metaphysics based on the premise of universal intersubjectivity will be Alfred North Whitehead, given his assumption that “the final real things of which the world is made up” are actual entities (momentary self-constituting subjects of experience).³ This is a direct challenge to the views of many, if not most, natural scientists from Galileo onwards that the “building-blocks” of physical reality, that is, atoms and molecules, are inert bits of matter moved by purely external forces and thus totally lacking in subjectivity or the potentiality for internal change and development.⁴ As a result, for these natural scientists, Nature is deterministic in its inner workings, equivalently a cosmic machine. Whitehead, on the contrary, proposed that Nature is alive, endowed with spontaneity, the capacity for internal change and development, at every level of existence and activity. Hence, even atoms and molecules are mini-organisms, not inanimate mini-things; and the larger entities of which they are the basic constituents are open-ended systems in their ongoing mode of operation to which every part or member actively contributes.

Yet Whitehead himself failed to think through the full implications of his own hypothesis that the final real things of this world are mini-organisms, momentary self-constituting subjects of experience. As a result, in *Process and Reality* he set forth a metaphysical scheme in which too much emphasis was placed on individual subjectivity in terms of actual entities engaged in their individual processes of self-constitution and not enough emphasis was given to the objective reality of the systems that these actual entities thereby bring into existence and continue to sustain. Hence, he should have amended his proposal at the beginning of *Process and Reality* that “the final real things of which the world is made up” are actual entities, momentary subjects of experience, so as to claim instead that the final real things of which the world is made up are both actual entities (subjects of experience) and the objectively existing societies that they sustain by their dynamic interrelation. Neither makes sense apart from its ongoing relationship to the other. Each provides the *raison d'être* for the other's existence.

In the chapter on “The Order of Nature” in *Process and Reality*, in fact, Whitehead seems to be saying much the same thing without fully acknowledging that the “final

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3. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected edition, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free, 1978), 18 [hereafter *PR*].
 4. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free, 1967), 17. See also Didier Debaise, *Nature as Event: The Lure of the Possible*, trans. Michael Halewood (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2017), 3–38. Debaise sees this presupposition of early modern science as a strictly artificial or contrived bifurcation between primary and secondary qualities, matter and spirit, in human perception of physical bodies.

real things of which the world is made up” have to be societies (enduring objective realities) as well as actual entities (momentary subjects of experience). For example, he proposes that “[T]he physical world is bound together by a general type of relatedness which constitutes it into an extensive continuum.”⁵ Through the ongoing interaction of its initial constituents (momentary subjects of experience endowed with a principle of self-organization or what Whitehead calls creativity),⁶ this objectively existing field of activity gives rise to more specialized societies of actual entities with even greater internal order and complexity: that is, a geometrical society followed by an “electromagnetic society,” then by ever more complex societies: “regular trains of waves, individual electrons, protons, individual molecules, societies of molecules such as inorganic bodies, living cells, and societies of cells such as vegetable and animal bodies.”⁷ All these corporate entities are created by intersubjective relations between momentary subjects of experience (Whiteheadian actual entities) at the different levels of existence and activity within physical reality. Likewise, more elementary societies or systems of actual entities give way to “structured societies,” societies which are composed not simply of actual entities but of subordinate societies of actual entities.⁸

Some of these structured societies are democratically organized with all subsocieties and their constituent actual entities contributing more or less equally to the structure and mode of operation of the structured society as a whole. Such would be individual entities like mountains and rivers and large corporate entities like human communities, herds of animals, political and economic institutions. Other structured societies, however, involve a “regnant nexus” or sequential set of higher-order actual entities (the equivalent of a “soul” in classical metaphysics). But, unlike the soul or life-principle within Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics, this regnant nexus of actual entities does not exercise top-down causal agency on relatively passive material constituents. Instead the regnant nexus of actual entities is emergent out of the dynamic interaction of the constituent actual entities in the sub-societies making up the physical body of the organism. At the same time, of course, in virtue of its own mode of operation this regnant nexus of actual entities provides order and directionality to the actual entities within the lower-order bodily subsocieties.⁹ For Whitehead, then, the soul does not exist for the sake of the body any more than the body exists for the sake of the soul. Only in ongoing reciprocal causal relation between bodily subsocieties of actual entities and the regnant nexus of actual entities constituting the soul does a physical organism as a special kind of Whiteheadian structured society function properly in relation to its environment.

Here one might object that there is then no reason for the existence and activity of God in Whitehead’s metaphysical scheme. This, however, would be a mistake.

5. Whitehead, *PR* 96.

6. Whitehead, *PR* 21.

7. Whitehead, *PR* 98.

8. Whitehead, *PR* 99.

9. Whitehead, *PR* 103; 106–107.

According to Whitehead, God is intimately involved in the cosmic process as its necessary principle of order and spontaneity or creativity. That is, in virtue of what Whitehead calls the divine “primordial nature,” God has an unchanging and all-inclusive overview of the possibilities available to finite actual entities at every moment of the cosmic process.¹⁰ Then, in virtue of the divine “consequent nature,” God “prehends” all the self-constituting decisions that have just been made by actual entities at each moment of the cosmic process and contrasts them with possibilities for further growth and development that are still available in terms of the divine primordial nature.

Finally, God offers concrete proposals for action to the next set of actual entities within the cosmic process.¹¹ God, therefore, does not control what happens from moment to moment within the cosmic process but nevertheless provides a set of goals and values for the cosmic process in line with God’s own sense of what is valuable and worth saving. God “saves the world as it passes into the immediacy of his own life. It is the judgment of a tenderness which loses nothing that can be saved. It is also the judgment of a wisdom which uses what in the temporal world is mere wreckage.”¹²

Whitehead’s philosophical understanding of God’s role in the cosmic process, however, is still not fully compatible with the biblical understanding of God as creator of heaven and earth and thus as transcendent of the cosmic process. Yet within a systems-oriented approach to the God–world relationship, God both transcends the cosmic process and has an ongoing involvement in the cosmic process. For, within a systems-oriented approach to reality, lower-order systems serve as the infrastructure for the operation of higher-order systems, and higher-order systems serve as the superstructure or broader social context for the operation of lower-order systems. The lower-order systems still retain their own ontological identity or distinctive mode of operation.¹³ But insofar as they are integrated into the higher-order system, they are “constrained” in their own mode of operation by the structure and ongoing mode of operation of the higher-order system.¹⁴

The Trinity, accordingly, is the higher-order system which serves as the superstructure of the cosmic process. The structure and mode of operation of the Trinity as a

10. Whitehead, *PR* 343–44.

11. Whitehead, *PR* 349–51; see also 244 for further explanation of what is meant by “concrete proposals for action” here.

12. Whitehead, *PR* 346.

13. See Terrence W. Deacon, *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 169–81. Deacon also analyzes physical reality in terms of hierarchically ordered systems with higher-order systems emergent out of the dynamic interrelationship between lower-order systems. Deacon’s understanding of the mode of operation of systems within physical reality, however, is much more deterministic than Whitehead’s explanation of how societies function in *Process and Reality*. For Deacon, the constituents of systems are inanimate entities that have no intrinsic connection to one another. They become organized into systems in virtue of external forces like gravity and electromagnetism and pure happenstance.

14. Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 186–205.

divine life-system or ongoing community of dynamically interrelated divine persons thus gives greater order and intelligibility to the cosmic process in the manner described above. The cosmic process, in turn, exists as a contingent infrastructure of the divine life-system. That is, it exists only in virtue of a free choice by the divine persons but it adds to the “fullness” of the divine life. As St. Paul notes in his epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians, not God alone but God and the world in collaboration co-constitute what the divine persons envision as the final goal of the cosmic process: “all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth” (Eph 1:10; Col 1:15–20 [NAB throughout]).

What I am proposing then is a systems-oriented approach to panentheism, the hypothesis that all finite things exist in God but still retain their own identity and mode of operation apart from God. Other philosophical explanations of the notion of panentheism tend toward either monism or dualism. For example, a common process-oriented understanding of panentheism is that God is the “soul” of the world and the world is the “body” of God.¹⁵ But this logically results in God being considered a constituent part of the cosmic process, not its transcendent source. Within classical metaphysics, God is present to the world in virtue of God’s essence as the cause of the existence of all creatures and by reason of God being known and loved consciously or unconsciously by all God’s rational creatures.¹⁶ But this still involves an implicit dualism or ontological gap between God as pure spirit and the persons and things of this world as in different ways a combination of matter and spirit.

In his book *The One, the Three and the Many*, Colin Gunton has much the same vision of a dynamic trinitarian God–world relationship as I do, but we differ on one key point. He initially points to the rootlessness and moral relativism of contemporary Western culture and then claims that this regrettable state of affairs can be remedied if human beings under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit imitate in their relations with one another the perichoretic relations of the divine persons to one another within the understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity proper to the Greek Fathers of the church.¹⁷ Like me, he also believes that the perichoretic relations among the divine persons can be replicated not only in the dealings of human beings with one another but in creation as a whole. Gunton, however, appeals to the inspiration of the Divine Spirit to bring about the relatedness of all the inanimate things of this world both to God and to one another.¹⁸ As I see it, this is a mistake. An inanimate thing cannot respond either positively or negatively to the inspiration of the Divine Spirit. Only a subject of experience can respond to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and become through its own initiative internally related both to God and other finite subjects of experience like itself. Likewise, only subjects of experience in ongoing dynamic interrelation can co-constitute the various systems of this world that in their own pattern of existence and

15. Charles Hartshorne, “The Compound Individual,” in *Philosophical Essays for Alfred North Whitehead* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1936), 218; Sallie McFague, *Models of God for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 78.

16. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1, q. 8, a. 3.

17. Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (New York: Cambridge University, 1993), 210–31.

18. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 180–88.

activity imitate in some measure the pattern of existence and activity of the divine persons to one another within the divine life-system. The Divine Spirit, in other words, does not work with inanimate things since they are incapable of responding to the promptings of the Spirit. The Divine Spirit only works with subjects of experience in this world, just as the Divine Spirit works with the Father and the Son as dynamically interrelated subjects of experience within the divine life-system.

These comments provide a suitable transition to the second part of this article in which I indicate how a systems-oriented approach to the church can illuminate both its past history and its current status in the post-Vatican II era. That is, a systems-oriented approach to the church makes clear that for the church properly to fulfill its divinely given mission to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19), there must be an ongoing reciprocal relation between the ordained members of the church (pope, bishops, priests, and deacons) and the non-ordained or lay members of the church. The ordained and non-ordained members of the church, in other words, are co-constituents of the church as a historical process or ongoing life-system.

A Systems-oriented Approach to Ecclesiology

The relation between different groups of church members, customarily designated as clergy and laity,¹⁹ has taken different forms over the centuries. As Bernard Prusak points out in his history of the church, “Open to God’s universal presence, the early communities were tentative, provisional, and free to experiment in regard to their own order and structure, and in relation to the particularities of various moments and contexts.”²⁰ Yet, as Richard Gaillardetz notes, “an incipient theology of tradition developed out of the need for early Christian communities to affirm their identity as one in continuity with the faith of the apostles. This need to demonstrate a continuity of faith came in response to the emergence of new sects, particularly those associated with Gnosticism.”²¹ Hence, in the first century of the church’s existence a distinction was made between the church as an institution protecting a relatively fixed body of doctrinal beliefs and liturgical practices and an open-ended historical process of sharing the Good News of the gospel message to ever-new groups of people in different cultural contexts. Hence, while all members were involved in the church as an ongoing historical process, the role of the local bishop in preserving the church’s tradition from error gradually took precedence over the way that the clergy and laity alike lived out and thereby transmitted the gospel message to others through the actual practice of the faith.²² In this way, the responsibility of all members of the church to live out the

19. See Edward P. Hahnenberg, *Ministries: A Relational Approach* (New York: Crossroad, 2003), 12–38.

20. Bernard Prusak, *The Church Unfinished: Ecclesiology Through the Centuries* (New York: Paulist, 2004), 56.

21. Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church: A People Called and Sent* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 211.

22. Prusak, *The Church Unfinished*, 107–19.

gospel message and thereby communicate it to others was more or less taken for granted, whereas the responsibility of the bishops to protect the institutional integrity of the church vis-à-vis Gnostic sects proclaiming another message of salvation was seen as of paramount importance.

As Prusak notes, the exercise of authority in the church likewise became more focused on the role of the pope in settling disputes both within the church and in the church's relation to civil authorities. With respect to the church's dealing with civil rulers, it was always justified by some challenge to the authority of the pope as head of the church in his dealing with princes and kings over the investiture of bishops and abbots of wealthy land-owning monasteries within the territories claimed by those same civil authorities.²³ But the ongoing process of handing down the faith to later generations of Christians thus became more or less identified with decisions made by the pope and to a lesser extent local councils of bishops. When Martin Luther and the other Protestant reformers then challenged the authority of the pope over the universal church, the bishops and theologians at the Council of Trent had no other choice than to affirm even more strongly the right of the pope and bishops to exercise their magisterium in matters of faith and morals.²⁴ The document *Pastor Aeternus* at Vatican I in 1870, in defining the infallibility of the Pope speaking *ex cathedra* in matters of faith and morals, was in effect the high point of a movement to centralization and uniformity of belief and practice within the church from the Middle Ages onwards.²⁵

But this strong emphasis on protecting the institutional integrity of the church, whether it be vis-à-vis other Christian denominations, non-Christian religions with their own doctrines and practices, or what was perceived to be the secularization of Western civilization as a result of the Enlightenment in eighteenth-century Europe, inevitably had unintended negative consequences. For this approach unconsciously undermined the key role of non-ordained members of the church both in exercising various forms of lay ministry within the church and in spreading the gospel message to the non-Christian world through their involvement in contemporary civil society.

This largely neglected issue of how ministry should be exercised within the church when understood as an evolving life-system as well as an institutional entity with a strong central authority became a focus of attention from the very beginning of the Second Vatican Council in October, 1962. As John W. O'Malley recounts in his comprehensive review of the proceedings of the Council, it was not simply a conflict between liberals and conservatives, namely, those seeking significant change in the church's current mode of operation and those seeking to preserve the status quo in the way that the church had functioned since the Council of Trent. For among the so-called liberals, there were historically minded bishops and theologians who wanted a return to more spontaneous forms of church life and worship found in local communities during the early centuries of the church's history, and still others who felt that church teaching on various issues needed to be updated by new developments in both

23. Prusak, *The Church Unfinished*, 179–84, 205–20.

24. Prusak, *The Church Unfinished*, 247–54.

25. Prusak, *The Church Unfinished*, 254–60.

philosophy and theology.²⁶ The more conservative group of bishops and their advisers, on the contrary, “fit the stereotype of the proponents of ‘Roman theology,’ a theology heavily conditioned by canon law, indifferent to the problems raised by historical methods, and often hermeneutically naïve.”²⁷

The result of that split in orientation and perspective among the bishops at Vatican II was a set of conciliar documents that were at times ambiguously worded, presumably so as to take account of quite different and deeply felt convictions about the nature and mission of the church among the bishops present at the Council. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), for example, basically dealt with issues related to the internal structure of the church and The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) was addressed to people of good will everywhere in the world in terms of common hopes and fears for the future. But each document also emphasized the reality of the church both as an institutional entity with a clearly defined teaching authority and as a life-system in which all church members are (or at least should be) energetically involved in their dealings with one another within the church and with non-Catholic friends and neighbors vis-à-vis important public problems and issues.²⁸

If one focuses on what O’Malley called the “spirit” of the Council as found in the style and wording of these two and still other conciliar documents,²⁹ however, there is good reason to believe that the Roman Catholic Church in the post-Vatican II era is in fact undergoing significant change in its basic mode of operation. It is gradually becoming more like an open-ended life system in which all members of the church in different ways share the responsibility of living out the gospel message and sharing it with other people both within the church and outside of it in society at large. To indicate more in detail how this new approach to life within the church correlates with the metaphysical scheme for a Whiteheadian society/open-ended life-system that I laid out in the first part of the article will be my next task.

I begin with citation of what Whitehead intended as the basic mode of operation for any society, large or small, in *Process and Reality*:

The causal laws which dominate a social environment are the product of the defining characteristic of that society. But the society is only efficient through its individual members.

26. John W. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2008), 292.

27. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 293.

28. The influence of Yves Congar on the proceedings at Vatican II is evident here. Congar distinguished between structure and life in his analysis of the workings of the church. As Timothy Ignatius MacDonald writes in his dissertation abstract, “Structure represents the unchanging, constitutive elements of the church in its sacraments, teaching and governing, whereas life is understood as the graced response of Christians to the divine initiatives as expressed in scripture and tradition.” See “The Ecclesiology of Yves Congar: Foundational Themes” (PhD diss., Marquette University, 1981), <http://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations/AA18211438/>.

29. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 305: “The style of the documents of Vatican II is what at first glance as well as most profoundly sets it apart from all other councils.”

Thus in a society, the members can only exist by reason of the laws which dominate the society, and the laws only come into being by reason of the analogous characters of the members of the society.³⁰

A Whiteheadian society is, accordingly, an objective reality, an enduring entity. But it is also the byproduct or ongoing outcome of dynamically interrelated subjects of experience in reciprocal causal relation. These subjects of experience in and through their dynamic interrelation are the efficient cause of the way that the society is structured from moment to moment. Saying “moment to moment” implies, of course, that what one set of actual entities (momentary subjects of experience) determines as the structure of their ongoing mode of operation can be changed by subsequent sets of actual entities. But the causal laws thus generated by ongoing reciprocal causal relations between sequential sets of actual entities in dynamic interrelation still guarantee relative stability and permanence in the ongoing mode of operation of the society or system. For these laws set constraints on what each new set of actual entities can change in terms of their governing structure and mode of operation as a society. Such a reciprocal interaction between past and present in the self-constitution of actual entities is most evident in successive moments of consciousness within human experience. Yet Whitehead is insistent that it is operative in the self-constitution of subjects of experience at all levels of existence and activity within nature.

This may seem like an overly complicated way to explain how societies of actual entities or systems function until one realizes that what Whitehead had in mind here was to analyze how an open-ended system works, that is, a system that is not fixed in its mode of operation but one that is capable of evolution in its internal constitution in and through the way its constituents alter their ongoing relation to one another in response to various changes taking place in the external environment of the system. If the documents of Vatican II thus give evidence of the Catholic Church becoming more and more an open-ended life-system, it is not surprising why some Roman Catholics were enthusiastic in their reading of those documents while other Catholics were alarmed by what they read. That is, the first group of Catholics welcomed what they saw as a new reciprocal relationship between all the members of the church in adjusting to life both within the church and in secular society. The second group, of course, was quite uneasy at what might happen if the pope and bishops were no longer fully in charge of the ongoing mode of operation of the church. For, unless the pope and bishops provided clear rules and regulations for everyone to follow vis-à-vis contemporary civil society with its tendency to moral relativism, the integrity of the gospel message might be seriously compromised.

As time went on, of course, it became clear that the second group of Catholics had no reason to be concerned and the first group had good reason to be disappointed, even discouraged, by the way that Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI implemented the decrees of Vatican II. All three basically retained the traditional top-down mode of operation within the church wherein it is the clear responsibility of the pope

30. Whitehead, *PR*, 90–91.

and bishops to issue rules and regulations for how church members should live and work within contemporary society. Every Catholic should adhere to these guidelines without hesitation. The risk in holding fast to this traditional top-down mode of operation within the church, however, is that it will become more and more a closed life-system existing apart from life in secular society. Likewise, its capacity for influencing the flow of events within the secular order will be considerably compromised. Yet, if the traditional hierarchical structure of authority within the church could still be maintained even as its members become more actively involved in the life of the church and its relation to contemporary civil society, then a suitable middle-ground position between these rival interest groups within the church could be achieved to the long-term benefit of the church as an ongoing life-system as well as an institutional entity.

Whitehead's description of the mind-body relationship for a human being should be of help here. The subsocieties of actual entities that co-constitute the human body with all its dynamically interrelated parts or members are strongly influenced in their more limited mode of operation by decisions made by a "regnant nexus" of actual entities, the mind or soul of the human being.³¹ The mind or soul, however, as a "regnant nexus" or higher-order set of actual entities, is still a subsociety within the overall unity of a human being as an organism or ongoing life-system. The mind or soul needs a steady stream of information from the subsocieties of actual entities proper to the body so as to make decisions that will affect the human being in his or her dealings with other human beings and the external environment.³² Thus the relation between mind and body within Whitehead's metaphysics is reciprocal and simultaneous, not unilateral (from cause to effect) as in the classical understanding of the mind-body relation. The mind is dependent upon the body and the body is dependent on the mind. But both exist as interrelated subsocieties in the human being as a structured society, a society made up of subsocieties.³³

Applied to the relation between the magisterium of the church and all its members, one can then without hesitation say that both the magisterium of the church and the active participation of its members in the life of the church are needed for the well-being of the church as a corporate life-system. The magisterium of the church as exercised by the pope and bishops expresses the "regnant nexus" or mind of the church, but it is still a subsociety within the overall corporate unity of the church as a structured society or ongoing life-system. Thus it can only properly function in terms of a reciprocal relationship with the body of the church, all its members both ordained and non-ordained, as organized into multiple subsocieties of actual entities in dynamic interrelation. Before making decisions affecting the church as a whole, the pope, bishops and their theological advisers representing the magisterium of the church should actively consult with these subsocieties representing the "body" of the church. Otherwise, their decisions will inevitably seem abstract, largely removed from the concrete life of other members of the church, namely, what is really going on in their

31. Whitehead, *PR*, 103, 108–109.

32. Whitehead, *PR*, 109.

33. Whitehead, *PR*, 99.

individual lives as Catholics who are struggling to be faithful to the teachings of Jesus in the midst of a secular world. The “body” of the church (all its members both ordained and non-ordained), in turn, needs the magisterium as the “mind” of the church to provide guidelines and an overall orientation to life both within the church and in civil society in very much the same way that the body of a human being needs the higher-order perspective of the mind in successfully adjusting to life going on all around it. In this way, the Catholic Church as an established institutional entity has its best chance for playing a prominent role in contemporary society. At the same time all the individual members of the church (both ordained and non-ordained) will presumably be energized both in terms of their relations to one another as well as in terms of their relations to non-Catholics. In the words of Pope Francis in his recent apostolic exhortation, Catholics will begin to feel anew “the joy of the Gospel.”³⁴

Concluding Comments


In this article, I first set forth an outline or sketch of a socially oriented metaphysics, namely, a metaphysics in which not individual entities, but organized groups or systems of individual entities, are the focus of attention. The individual entities that are the constituents of these systems are momentary self-constituting subjects of experience, what Whitehead called “actual entities” that in temporal sequence produce the objective reality of an open-ended system capable of structural change and thus not closed or deterministic in its mode of operation. Then in the second part of the article I applied this metaphysical scheme to ecclesiology, that is, both the past history and the current status of the Catholic Church as an evolving life-system as well as a relatively fixed institutional entity. I argued that the past history of the church resulted over the centuries in a highly centralized institutional reality with far more top-down than bottom-up causation in its internal workings, but that the spirit of Vatican II, expressed in the conciliar documents, seemed to signal a new emphasis on the church as an evolving life-system with reciprocal causation among its members in the common task of spreading the message of the gospel to the contemporary world.

There are many reasons why I believe that this shift in focus within the Catholic Church is providential, the result of the hidden workings of the triune God in the ongoing life of the church, rather than an unfortunate set of circumstances that needs to be remedied by return to a more traditional fixed mode of operation. As I see it, not just Roman Catholics but human beings everywhere in contemporary society are in many different ways being alerted to the way in which dynamically interrelated systems strongly influence, in some cases virtually control, their lives as individuals struggling to survive and prosper in a highly competitive world. Yet, as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann proposed years ago in their book *The Social Construction of Reality*, “social order is a human product, or, more precisely an ongoing human production . .

34. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (hereafter *EG*).

. Social order exists only as a product of human activity.”³⁵ Hence, there is no reason for despondency in the face of unjust systems that impose a heavy burden on one’s own life and the lives of the great majority of people around oneself. If these systems were brought into existence in and through the concerted efforts of human beings in earlier generations, then the present and future generations of human beings should be able over time systematically to introduce needed reforms of those systems, even in some cases to replace them. In the second part of the article, accordingly, I argued that more attention should be given to the notion of the church as an ongoing life-system that works best when all members of the church are actively involved in, even enthusiastic about, the church’s mission to spread the gospel message to one another as well as to everyone else who will listen.³⁶ Guidelines for this evangelizing activity of church members both inside and outside the church that have been issued by the pope or national conferences of bishops are certainly indispensable, but the key factor for success of such a venture is the way that all the members of the church (both ordained and non-ordained) accept the challenge involved in being more invested in its mission of spreading the message of the gospel. As Pope Francis points out in *The Joy of the Gospel*, “When the Church summons Christians to take up the task of evangelization, she is simply pointing to the source of authentic personal fulfilment. For ‘here we discover a profound law of reality: that life is attained and matures in the measure that it is offered up in order to give life to others. This is certainly what mission means.’”³⁷

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35. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 49.

36. See Hahnenberg, *Ministries*, 35: “The starting-point for a theology of ministry is the presence of God in the church community; its proper framework is a concentric-circles model in which various ministries serve within a church that as a whole ministers within the world.” Hahnenberg is here arguing against the more traditional dividing-line model of the church in which the clergy are the top half and the laity are the bottom-half (10).

37. EG 5. Reference is to the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, *Aparecida Document* (June 29, 2007), 160.