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Ecclesiology *via* Ethnography: Studying the Church through a Discernment of Concrete Ecclesial Life

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Abstract

Pope Francis's 2023 *motu proprio*, entitled *Ad Theologiam Promovendam* ("To Promote Theology"), calls for theology to be rethought methodologically and epistemologically in light of existential wounds. In response, I argue that the developing field of ethnographic ecclesiology presents one important theological method for studying the synodal church in a more synodal manner. By reorienting the ethnographic habits of participation, reflexivity, and listening to the synodal vision of communal discernment, the theologian is better able to perceive the trinitarian imprint that shapes the witness and discipleship of distinct ecclesial contexts that constitute the global church *in via*.

Keywords

discernment, discipleship, Eastern Catholic, ecclesiology, ethnography, Melkite, methodology, pilgrim church, synodality, witness

After concluding the first session of the 2023 Synod on Synodality, Pope Francis called for more dynamic and engaged forms of theology by issuing a *motu proprio* entitled *Ad Theologiam Promovendam* ("To Promote

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Theology").[1] He called for a paradigm shift in Catholic theology that not only validates the inductive, contextual, and pastoral work that has motivated many theologians since the end of the Second Vatican Council but also argues that in a synodal church, theologians must not

> settle for a desk-bound theology. Let your place of reflection be the borders. . . . Even good theologians, like good shepherds, smell of the people and the street and, with their reflection, pour oil and wine on the wounds of people. Openness to the world, to human persons in the concreteness of their existential situations, with their problems, their wounds, their challenges, their potential . . . must urge theology to be rethought epistemologically and methodologically.[2]

By going to the borders and peripheries of wounded human existence, the discipline becomes "a fundamentally contextual theology"[3] that has the "peculiar task" of discerning "the trinitarian imprint" within reality's "web of relationships."[4]

Responding to this call for more innovative and integrated forms of theology, I argue that the developing field of ethnographic ecclesiology provides one response to studying the synodal church in a more synodal manner. Various theologians, from Joseph A. Komonchak and Nicholas M. Healy to the scholars of the ecumenical network *Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, have advanced this interdisciplinary conversation for more than three decades. I first address some of the methodological tensions that emerge when studying the nature of the church as both divine and human. I then consider how Healy's proposal critiques what he calls "blueprint ecclesiologies" before examining how ethnographic ecclesiology can respond to Francis's desire for theology to be rethought methodologically and epistemologically, particularly through the cultivation of habits like participation, listening, and reflexivity. I weave in vignettes from my fieldwork with migrant and American-born Melkite Catholics in the greater Boston area[5] to demonstrate the strength of this method and will conclude

1. I want to thank Dries Bosschaert and Peter De Mey for inviting me to deliver the original version of this article as a keynote at the LEST XIV Conference. I am also grateful to Todd Whitmore, Edward P. Hahnenberg, Kerry P. C. San Chirico, Kevin L. Hughes, Stephanie Wong, Héctor M. Varela-Rios, and Emma McDonald Kennedy for reading earlier drafts, offering encouragement, and providing insightful comments on this expanded version.
2. Francis, *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, apostolic letter issued motu proprio (November 1, 2023), §3, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html. At present, the Vatican has only issued this document in Italian, with no English or any other translation available. I have not yet found an official English translation; all translations are my own.
3. *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, §3.
4. *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, §4.
5. From 2015 to 2017, I spent twenty-two months as a participant-observer among three Eastern Catholic diaspora communities in Boston: Melkite Catholics from Lebanon/Syria, Ge'ez Catholics from Ethiopia/Eritrea, and SyroMalabar Catholics from Kerala, India. I also conducted thirty interviews with parishioners during that time.

this essay by drawing out the ecclesial implications of studying the church through a discernment of concrete ecclesial life.

Methodological Considerations for Studying the Divine-Human Nature of the Church

The stunning Byzantine-inspired architecture of Our Lady of the Annunciation Melkite Cathedral stood as a testament to the hard work and sacrifices of three generations of Syrian and Lebanese immigrants who migrated to the South End neighborhood of Boston in the 1890s and eventually moved to the suburbs. Soon after the Second Vatican Council, the Holy See elevated the suburban community from a parish church to a cathedral, with the inaugural Divine Liturgy celebrated on March 25, 1966, the Feast of the Annunciation. Fifty years later, in spring 2016, I entered the cathedral's beautiful icon-filled sanctuary and took my seat amid an unusually packed crowd for a Saturday evening.

A few months earlier, a parishioner gifted me a striking blue-and-gold embroidered pouch that depicted Our Lady of Soufanieh, named after a village outside Damascus where she appeared. This Marian image holds a special place in the Arab Christian imagination, particularly in connection with the guest speaker that evening: Myrna Al-Akhras Nazzour. Near the place where St. Paul was converted and baptized more than two thousand years ago, Myrna began receiving extraordinary apparitions from the Virgin Mary in 1982. Accompanying these apparitions, oil miraculously flowed from a framed picture of Our Lady in her living room. Oil also simultaneously emerged from Myrna's face and hands. In the decades that followed, she also experienced the stigmata five times in correspondence with Christ's wounds on the cross. Over the years, thousands of visitors monitored her visions, some in search of miracles and others for scientific research. Myrna's experiences received the approval of Roman Catholic authorities, the Melkite prelate, and the Orthodox patriarch.[6] *After receiving a final apparition in 2004, she has traveled the world to share the insights of these mystical visions.*

Though naturally cautious about claims regarding the supernatural, I maintained an open mind out of respect for those who graciously welcomed me into their community and who insisted that I should not miss this experience. Observing those around me as we waited for the event to begin, I overheard parishioners—mostly from Syria and Lebanon, and a few from Jordan, Egypt, and Palestine—speak with great anticipation and excitement. There was a positive buzz in the air as the congregation seemed familiar with Myrna and her story. When the speaker was introduced, it was made known that her message would first be delivered in Arabic and that a deacon would read the English translation afterward.

Myrna walked to the front of the sanctuary, looked down, paused in what might have been a moment of silent prayer, gently smiled, and began. Though I did not

6. For more, see Robert J. Fox, *Light from the East: Miracles of Our Lady of Soufanieh* (Hanceville, AL: Fatima Family Apostolate, 2002).

understand Arabic, I was captivated by her calm but confident presence. There was no pride or arrogance. She spoke with a quiet authority and a depth of conviction that resonated in both her voice and her eyes. Standing at the left lectern in front of the gilded iconostasis that surrounded her like a cloud of witnesses, there was something grace-filled about that moment. I looked across the altar to see Archbishop Nicholas Samra leaning forward, enthralled from the cathedra *on the right. Aware that this hierarch did not tolerate nonsense, I was surprised to see his receptivity and curious to hear the translation that followed.*

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Before continuing with the translation in the next section, I want to pause here and reflect on how studying the divine-human aspects of the church[7] poses distinct methodological challenges for ecclesiology. If both the divine and human aspects are not given proper attention, then the study of the church risks either a theological reduction that describes the church only in transcendent terms or a sociological reduction that reduces the church to a purely temporal reality.[8] During the second session of Vatican II, the council rejected an initial schema that began with a chapter entitled "The Nature of the Church Militant" and instead titled the first chapter of what became *Lumen Gentium* as "The Mystery of the Church." For Cardinal Avery Dulles, this emphasis on mystery characterizes the ecclesiology of the council and has "important implications for methodology."[9] The first chapter's claim that the church in Christ is to be a "sign and instrument" of communion with God and unity of the whole human race[10] highlights the impossibility of scientific objectivity when studying the church precisely because theologians are involved in it. As Thomas Aquinas and others have argued, the church is known through a kind of connaturality or intersubjectivity between the divine and human,[11] which first began in Christ and continues in the church. Respecting this connatural epistemology, some theologians draw from the natural sciences to develop ecclesial models, while others have argued for a correlational method between theology and the social sciences.

The natural sciences often use models to investigate that which lies beyond direct human experience.[12] For example, physicists use models created with billiard balls to study the phenomena of light. Because the mystery of divine self-gift that constitutes the church cannot be spoken of directly, Dulles argues for the use of analogical models

7. "But, the society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element." *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), §8, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (hereafter cited as *LG*).
8. Joseph Komonchak, *Foundations in Ecclesiology*, ed. Fred Lawrence (Boston: Lonergan Workshop Journal, 1995), 64; 82.
9. Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image, 2002), 9–10.
10. *LG*, §1.
11. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation*, ed. Timothy McDermott (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1997), II-II.1.4, ad 3.
12. Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 15.

in the field of theology to provide indirect explanatory and exploratory knowledge of the church without encompassing the infinite in finite categories. He identifies six models that have shaped the Roman Catholic ecclesial imagination throughout the modern period. While an institutional model that envisioned the church as the *societas perfecta* dominated ecclesial discourse from the late Middle Ages until about 1940, it was displaced by a model of the Mystical Body before being "subsequently dislodged by three other models in rapid succession: those of People of God, Sacrament, and Servant."[13] During the papacy of John Paul II, Dulles also added the model of the church as a community of disciples, which finds meaning in the centripetal orientation to worship and the centrifugal orientation to mission.[14] Because of the inherent mystery of the church that resists a closed system of scientific experimentation and verification, Dulles argues that "theological verification" of a model's efficacy "depends upon a kind of corporate discernment of spirits . . . a type of spiritual perception . . . closely connected with the connaturality that we have already referred."[15]

Ecclesial models are admirable in many ways, particularly in respecting the bounds that divine revelation sets for the study of ecclesiology. Analogical models present a significant heuristic tool that helps theologians make sense of tensions in post-Vatican II ecclesiology, but the models that Dulles names do not adequately account for the concrete impact of human freedom, finitude, and sin on ecclesial existence *in via*. Ecclesiology cannot be reduced to images or statements *about* the church;[16] it must also understand the members who constitute the church—how they live and relate to one another in light of the Gospel. Catholic ecclesiologist Joseph A. Komonchak argues that to deny the latter is to sacrifice a fuller understanding of the church's mystery.[17] He further argues that the second chapter of the conciliar document *Lumen Gentium* entitled "People of God" cannot be separated from the first chapter on mystery. When the Doctrinal Commission introduced the second chapter at the council, they insisted that the two are inseparable when understanding the church's inner nature and purpose.[18] Komonchak further argues that

> whatever Christian faith may say about the divine origin, center, and goal of the church, it never pretends that the Church does not stand on this side of the distinction between Creator and creature. The Church is not God; it is not Jesus Christ; it is not the Holy Spirit. If the Church is the People of God, the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, it is all of these as a human reality.[19]

13. Dulles, 22.
14. Dulles, 211.
15. Dulles, 18.
16. Komonchak, *Foundations*, 67; emphasis in original.
17. Komonchak, vii–viii.
18. Joseph Komonchak, "Ecclesiology of Vatican II," *Origins* 28 (April 22, 1999): 764, https://jakomonchak.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/jak-ecclesiology-of-vatican-ii-2.pdf.
19. Joseph Komonchak, "Ecclesiology and Social Theory: A Methodological Essay," *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 45, no. 2 (1981): 269, https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.1981.0029.

Adopting Bernard Lonergan's framework, Komonchak's *Foundations in Ecclesiology* calls on ecclesiologists to rethink the methodological foundations of the discipline through a better integration of the social sciences. For him, the study of the ecclesial community requires not only a "hermeneutics of texts" but also a "hermeneutics of social existence."[20]

The fields of practical theology and many forms of contextual theology have pursued this interdisciplinary conversation by developing methods of correlation. These methods, however, maintain a disciplinary distance between qualitative methods and theological reflection.[21] Through various accounts of a hermeneutical spiral, correlational methods start with categories drawn from the social sciences followed by biblical and doctrinal reflection. From the perspective of social science, however, theology is only acceptable as data that emerges from the context of fieldwork, but not as an external theoretical framework or critical form of analysis. The "fundamental point of contention is God," and that contention is what makes this interdisciplinary conversation difficult.[22]

Pete Ward, a major contributor to the ecumenical network *Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, argues that the first nimble step is to remove the assumption that ethnographic methods are inevitably or essentially located only in the social sciences. Building on the insights gained in both anthropology and sociology, theologians are just as capable of utilizing ethnography in their study of the church. Neil Ormerod further argues that while theologians must incorporate the insights and methods of the social sciences, they must be reoriented to a *telos* that contributes to the building up of the kingdom of God.[23]

To argue for this reorientation, Ormerod draws from social theorist Carl Hempel to note that the goal of the social sciences is to provide systematic "insight into factual connections between social events, as cause and effect."[24] Yet this goal assumes that all empirical data related to human societies is intelligible. Not so. The social sciences must also contend with unintelligible events that result from the problem of evil. Unlike the natural sciences, which rule out the theory when the facts do not fit, the social sciences are susceptible to rationalizing the facts to fit the theory.[25] For example, the sociopolitical structures of South African apartheid were based on the lie of racial science to justify an unethical division of power and resources based on skin color. For Lonergan, this lack of intelligibility is a "social surd" that results from a misuse of

20. Komonchak, *Foundations*, 53.
21. Pete Ward, "Theology and Qualitative Research: An Uneasy Relationship," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research*, ed. Pete Ward and Knut Tveitereid (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2022), 7.
22. Ward, "Theology and Qualitative Research," 7–8.
23. Neil Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church: An Experiment in Systematic-Historical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 42–59.
24. Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church*, 43.
25. Ormerod, 48.

human freedom, which has consequences for human society.[26] Because of the problem of evil, all methods that study human behavior must be reoriented to a *telos* that contributes to, rather than diminishes, human flourishing. From a theological standpoint, the biblical image of the kingdom of God provides "a symbolic and heuristic anticipation of complete human flourishing, a symbol that captures the basic teleology of human history, drawn forward by grace, yet always threatened by the backward pull of sin."[27] By reorienting the *telos* of ethnographic methods to the building up of the kingdom of God, theologians who use these methods are better able to make sense of the "social surd" they may encounter in their fieldwork.

With these arguments, both Ward and Ormerod reflect Francis's recent *motu proprio*, which argues that theology can no longer "close itself in self-referentiality, which leads to isolation and insignificance."[28] Rather, by engaging in genuine interdisciplinarity, which Francis calls *transdisciplinarity*, theology must perceive itself as a discipline that exists relationally within a web of different forms of knowledge yet orients all that emerges to Wisdom.[29] Here, one can understand "Wisdom" to be synonymous with Jesus's mission and desire for human flourishing proclaimed in the kingdom of God. This renewed engagement with other disciplines "leads to the arduous task" of needing to use different methods and new categories developed by other epistemologies and "transmitting the teaching of Jesus in today's languages with originality and critical awareness."[30]

In many ways, the use of ethnographic methods that are reoriented to the building up of the kingdom of God allows the theologian to better explore the dynamics of contextualization through a "disciplined and structured approach to hearing the voices of individuals and communities that have often been overlooked" or misunderstood.[31] Theologians must foreground voices from the peripheries who may not be theological experts but who have insights regarding the concrete, often messy realities of ecclesial life. I hope that by exploring one particular ecclesial context, with experiences that are often different from mainstream North American Catholicism, theologians will be challenged to think through what it means to study the church through a discernment of concrete ecclesial life.

The Call for Ethnographic Ecclesiology for a Church *in via*

As the Melkite deacon read the English translation of Myrna's message during the spring of 2016, I slowly understood that her primary concern was the need for unity through the healing of divisions and wounds. She expressed sorrow over the current

26. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, vol. 3, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, ed. Frederick Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 254–57.
27. Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church*, 96.
28. *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, §5.
29. *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, §§5, 7.
30. *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, §5.
31. Ward, "Theology and Qualitative Research," 9.

state of Syria under ISIS occupation, which produced unimaginable terror in a land where people of different denominations and religions once lived peacefully. Since the beginning of her apparitions more than thirty years ago, the consistent message she has received from both Jesus and Our Lady of Soufanieh is about unity—unity within the church, unity within the family, and unity of the self with Christ. When Jesus Christ walked through Palestine, this was his prayer: "that they may all be one" (Jn 17:21, NRSV, used throughout).

Myrna challenged the audience to reflect on how it is possible to stand before God crying out for mercy amid constant crises in the Middle East without also working toward the unity that Christ so ardently desires in our lives. Our relationship with God cannot be separated from our relationship with one another. We cannot serve and love God while misunderstanding, hurting, and judging one another. This unity, she continues, begins in the family, which must stand together in daily prayer to fulfill its mission and duty—to become a small church. This is why, Myrna believes, God chose her as a married woman and did not call her to be a nun. A family, striving for holiness amid the world, is important to God. It is within the family that we learn reconciliation, love, and acceptance of the other's difference. The unity of the church comes from first learning the lessons of unity in our homes and families.

For Myrna, this message of unity was reinforced in 1984, 1987, 1990, 2001, and 2004 when the Easter celebrations of East and West coincided on the same days. During the Triduum of each of these years, she would receive the stigmata. Though the signs stopped in 2004, she believes that God's work toward unity is always present because the most important sign is the resurrection of Christ made present in the Eucharist during the Divine Liturgy. The divisions are not the faults of the heads of the churches but the whole church. Because each Christian is a living stone that builds up the church, each one must fast, pray, and work for unity in the church and in the Middle East, where Jesus lived, died, and resurrected. The Christian presence in the Middle East must be maintained despite increasing desperation and migration. According to Myrna, Jesus is begging his people for greater unity at this particular time because of the chaos occurring in the Middle East. She insists that we need a shared revival and testimony of the faith based in love. If there is no love, there is no forgiveness. If there is no forgiveness, there is no unity. She concludes by imploring all those in the Arabic Christian diaspora to pray for peace and unity in the Middle East, especially in Syria, which is bleeding. Finally, she asks that the congregation pray for her so that she may remain a humble messenger of God.

Though I had a delayed reaction because I did not understand the original Arabic, the English translation moved me deeply. I could now understand why Bishop Samra sat at the edge of his seat and the parishioners around me had tears in their eyes. Myrna's message touched multiple dimensions of human finitude and sin that plague both the individual heart and the pilgrim church. Leaving the cathedral that day, I was also struck by the profound consciousness that Middle Eastern Catholics bear as the first audience of the Gospel. Damascus and Palestine are not distant locations mentioned in the Bible, but intimate towns and villages connected to a sense of home through which Jesus and his disciples walked two thousand years ago.

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At the turn of the century, Catholic theologian Nicholas M. Healy published his work *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* as a call for more innovative and challenging forms of contemporary ecclesiology that attend to what is often considered secondary in the field, "namely the church's concrete identity *in via*."[32] In addition to the use of history and sociology, he argues for the development and use of ethnographic methods in ecclesiology that specifically attend to the church's witness and discipleship as it continues along its pilgrim way. Theologians who engage in ethnographic ecclesiology are not impartial observers but "theologically positioned subjects" who discern intersubjectively as they "adopt 'thick descriptions' of concrete ecclesial life as part of the ongoing, self-critical Christian tradition of inquiry."[33]

Healy further argues that Dulles's ecclesiological models, as well as his desire to systematize them, are misguided because they display "a preference for describing the church's theoretical and essential identity rather than its concrete and historical identity."[34] These modern ecclesiologies do not make their contexts explicit and have turned their models into universal normative principles, or what he calls "blueprint ecclesiologies," with little regard for how the average Christian community struggles to live the Gospel and with little attention to how sin and finitude impact discipleship *in via*.[35] Moreover, these ecclesiologies are often constructed with a two-part ontological structure that separates the spiritual from the empirical. While the divine aspect belongs to the true essence of the church, the human is regarded as secondary.[36] The concrete experiences of human congregations make little or no contribution to how we understand the church.

For example, Dulles's model of the church as sacrament, which was first advanced by Henri de Lubac's *ressourcement* of the patristic and medieval period and developed further by numerous conciliar theologians including Karl Rahner, defines the church as a sacrament of God's grace-filled presence in the world.[37] Healy notes how the distinction in Roman Catholic sacramental theology between the grace itself, the *res*, and the physical reality that expresses that grace, the *sacramentum*,

> permits Rahner to distinguish the church's "divine interiority" (i.e., its primary aspect) as something that is "essentially different" from the church's "bodily nature," the visible "earthly reality" of the church (i.e., its secondary aspect). Drawing a parallel with the most basic sacrament, the Incarnation, Rahner contends that while the two aspects are not to be confused, neither should they be divided. In spite of sin and human finitude the visible church is indeed a true sacrament or *Realsymbol*, for it makes present in history the *res* that is hidden within it.[38]

32. Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 154.
33. Healy, *Church*, 180.
34. Healy, 3.
35. Healy, 39–43.
36. Healy, 28.
37. Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 55–56.
38. Healy, *Church*, 28–29, with quotations from Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 2, trans. Karl-Heinz Kruger (New York: Crossroad, 1975), 73, 76.

Healy interprets Rahner as not only prioritizing the spiritual but also dismissing the presence of human finitude or sin in the empirical as a distortion of the more inherent spiritual essence. For example, the reality that the Eucharist is "frequently divided by race, class, gender, and political ideology, to say nothing of denominational divisions"[39] hardly impacts the ecclesiological articulation of the church as sacrament.

Healy, however, insists that ecclesiology must be reconfigured from a speculative and systematic discipline into a practical and prophetic one that can better help the church live into its vocation for witness and discipleship.[40] The church *in via* is quite different from the church triumphant. Following St. Paul, he insists that the church does not possess any claim to inherent perfection and is only perfect to the extent that it can boast in Christ crucified. Continued focus on the abstract ideal draws the ecclesiologist's attention away from the concrete when they should also be discerning theologically with communities in their ecclesial contexts. Francis's *motu proprio* reinforces this idea more than two decades later by encouraging theologians to venture beyond desk-bound theologies to encounter "human persons in the concreteness of their existential situations, with their problems, their wounds, their challenges, [and] their potential."[41]

This focus on concrete ecclesial contexts, which for Healy is about culture and "all that bears upon or contributes to the shape of Christian witness and discipleship and its ecclesial embodiment,"[42] leads to the second part of Healy's proposal, which argues for better integration of ecclesiology with disciplines like history, sociology, and ethnography. This integration of disciplines can provide necessary insights into the concrete, messy, and sinful realities of the church *in via*.[43] Healy, like Ward, acknowledges that these nontheological disciplines are often only taken seriously in society and the academy to the extent that they adopt an agnostic stance that brackets out theological truth claims. Because ecclesiologists take Christian revelation as truth, they are not called to engage other disciplines by adopting "the disinterested objectivity or humanist agenda of the academic agnostic," but to "discern the movement of the Spirit . . . in an engaged, even prayerful manner."[44] Healy's proposal supports Pope Francis's conception of *transdisciplinarity* because it resists simply correlating sociological data with theological reflection and calls the theologian to a deeper integration of both epistemologies. Because the church can be "worldly" or sinful, and because the Spirit acts in all of creation, there is a permeability between church and society. This permeability shapes different ecclesial contexts, which in turn shape how witness and discipleship are lived out in a particular time and a particular space.

While Healy's proposal is significant for addressing *both* the human and divine aspects of the concrete church *in via*, I agree with Sjoerd Mulder's critique that

39. Healy, *Church*, 37.
40. Healy, 21.
41. *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, §3.
42. Healy, *Church*, 39.
43. Healy, 50.
44. Healy, 166.

Healy does not need to oppose the modern blueprint ecclesiologies that he perceives in Dulles's models to propose the use of ethnography in ecclesiology.[45] Healy's preference for the church *in via* or the pilgrim church is itself a model that fruitfully aligns with postconciliar attempts at undoing the ecclesial triumphalism of former eras in favor of eschatological humility. We are not simply individual pilgrims but a pilgrim community, a pilgrim church that will not achieve perfection until the end of history.[46] Healy admits that from the pilgrim's perspective, the blueprint ecclesiologies in Dulles's models are better interpreted as a rhetorical strategy intended to spur effort toward an ideal vision and concrete goal.[47] The strength of Healy's critique, therefore, lies in the resistance to a twofold ontological structure that separates the spiritual from the empirical. Thus, without dismissing the insights of other ecclesiologies, Healy's call for an ethnographic ecclesiology to study the divine-human nature of the church still holds promise as a means of advancing ecclesial self-understanding.

Over the past twenty-five years, the ecumenical network *Ecclesiology and Ethnography* has taken up Healy's proposal.[48] Early on, the turn to ethnography was "understood as a way of doing theology that is grounded in doctrinal and normative ecclesiological claims concerning the relationship between revelation and church."[49] Yet as the conversation evolved, the explicit connection between the normativity of doctrine and ethnographic methods was not always emphasized. Ward expressed his concern that a central challenge for the *Ecclesiology and Ethnography* network is to make the epistemological dimensions of systematic and doctrinal theology more explicit in their ethnographic accounts.[50] Clare Watkins likewise observes that the "danger is that practical or ethnographic 'ecclesiologies' really do little more than produce descriptions of the living of church and remain at a loss as to what to make of

45. Sjoerd Mulder, "Practical Ecclesiology for a Pilgrim Church: The Theological Motives behind Healy's Ethnographic Turn," *Ecclesiology* 14 (2018): 172, https://doi.org/10.1163/17455316-01402005.
46. Richard R. Gaillardetz, *An Unfinished Council: Vatican II, Pope Francis, and the Renewal of Catholicism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 67–69.
47. Healy, *Church*, 36.
48. Mulder, "Practical Ecclesiology," 165. In 2007, several theologians met at Yale University to discuss the relationship between these disciplines and published their papers in two seminal volumes. Since then, this dialogue has continued at the annual Ecclesiology and Ethnography conference held at Durham University and in the Ecclesial Practices program unit at the American Academy of Religion, which often lead to articles published in the journal *Ecclesial Practices*.
49. Jonas Ideström, "Ecclesiology and Ethnography—Issues and Dilemmas in a Conversation," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 19, no. 4 (2019): 306, https://doi.org/10.1080/1474225X.2019.1692181.
50. Pete Ward, "Is Theology What Matters?," in *What Really Matters: Scandinavian Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. J. Ideström and T. S. Kaufman (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 165.

the described realities theologically."[51] In fact, some have mistaken Healy's critique of idealistic models as a critique of normative theological or doctrinal claims in general.

Early on, Healy expresses caution regarding the troubling direction of the new ecclesiologies. He argues that if the focus on concrete practices is not simultaneously theological, then "the turn to the communal subject . . . threatens to collapse the object of faith into ourselves."[52] For a more well-rounded turn to the concrete life of the church, he draws from Aquinas to argue that ecclesiologists must discern the work of the economic Trinity in the life of the church that is located in the *exitus-reditus* dynamic of reality. Any account of the church must also describe how the Word and the Spirit engage with the wayfarers *in via* to better serve the church in witness and discipleship.[53] Again, Healy's clarification corresponds with Pope Francis's insistence that the peculiar task of theologians is to discern the trinitarian imprint on the web of relationships that constitute reality. Yet such discernment when doing ecclesiology ethnographically often requires a spiritual turn in ethnographic habits like participation, self-reflexivity, and listening, especially as one enters the messiness of concrete ecclesial existence outside one's experience.

Reorienting Ethnographic Habits to Spiritual Discernment

In early fall 2015, months before I heard Myrna's testimony, I arrived at Our Lady of the Annunciation Melkite Cathedral with the desire to study the lived experiences of Eastern Catholics in diaspora. During the first Sunday, however, my initial excitement gave way to the discomfort of displacement. After the morning English liturgy, I walked downstairs to the basement to find round tables set up for coffee and conversation. I tried to connect with the elderly man standing near the coffee cups displayed on the table in the front, but he simply nodded at me and made his way to his friends with whom he could freely speak and laugh in Arabic. I then tried to strike up a conversation with another young man who mentioned that he was Roman Catholic and visiting from Holy Cross Cathedral. However, he too was in a hurry to leave, so I did not press him further about his visit. I knew that in this predominantly Middle Eastern community, I stood out as a darker-skinned, Indian woman.[54] *People did not know what to make of me since this was my first visit and I did not come with anyone they knew. Moreover, no one owed me their time or life stories.*

51. Clare Watkins, "Practicing Ecclesiology: From Product to Process: Developing Ecclesiology as a Non-Correlative Process and Practice through the Theological Action Research Framework of Theology in Four Voices," *Ecclesial Practices* 2 (2015): 28, https://doi.org./10.1163/22144471-00201009.
52. Nicholas M. Healy, "Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness?," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5, no. 3 (2003): 302, https://doi.org/10.1111/1463-1652.00110.
53. Healy, "Practices," 303–4.
54. I am, however, familiar with what it is like to have a theologian doing fieldwork in my community. In 2008, during the inauguration of the first US SyroMalabar Catholic cathedral in

I reminded myself to be patient and trust that by consistently showing up and remaining open, something beautiful would emerge. I also acknowledged the need for greater humility in not taking any awkward experience personally and for proceeding with hope that this work would not be in vain. Finishing my coffee, I decided it would be better to try again the following Sunday. I made my way through the small hallway that connected a few Sunday school classrooms and a stairway to the ground level above. As I paused to scan the bulletin board filled with colorful flyers detailing an upcoming St. Barbara hafli (festival), Father John,[55] *the rector of the cathedral, reached the bottom of the stairs and greeted me to see how the research was going. I was encouraged by his hospitable presence. I asked whether it might be possible for him to introduce me to the congregation after the English and Arabic liturgy the following Sunday to give the parishioners a sense of who I was from a trusted source. The introductions might also encourage them to be more open to engaging in interviews. He mentioned that he would be delighted to do so and invited me to attend the first half of the parish council meeting the following Tuesday evening to meet more people.*

That Tuesday, I parked my car after sunset and walked to the back of the church until I saw a single light shining through the stained-glass window depicting Christ the King in the regalia of a Byzantine emperor. The other parish council members had not arrived yet, but I followed a small glow of light until I found the priest sitting in a well-lit room with a library and a large mahogany meeting table surrounded by about fifteen swivel chairs. As council members slowly arrived after a long workday, Father John asked me about the origin of my last name. He mentioned that Melkites often took the name of their profession in Arabic while Maronites often used biblical names like mine. Deacon Youssef and another parish council member named Basil joined our conversation until it was time for the opening prayer.

Father John then introduced me as a Boston College student hoping to conduct interviews and mentioned he would be introducing me after both the Arabic and English liturgies the following Sunday. One middle-aged woman named Sumaya asked if the questions were related to spirituality. I used the opportunity to begin my introduction and mentioned that spirituality was one of the themes. I also mentioned how my parents immigrated from South India and how I witnessed the numerous sacrifices they and other families made to establish the first SyroMalabar Catholic churches in the United States. These experiences made me curious about other Eastern Catholic churches in the US and how they understood their identity between their homeland

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Chicago, a researcher came to observe our celebrations. Most parishioners were friendly but did not engage. Though I was a junior in college at the time, I approached out of curiosity and with a desire to not be rude to a newcomer who was obviously not Indian. Her ethnographic observations can be found here: Kimberly Hope Belcher, "Overflowing the Mar Thoma Cathedral: Ritual Dynamics and Syro-Malabar Identity," *Ecclesia Orans* 32 (2015): 167–87, https://ecclesiaorans.com/2018/07/30/year-xxxii-2015-1-abstract-k-h-belcher/.

55. All names are pseudonyms used to protect the identities of those I met during my fieldwork. The priest was aware of my research because I had to secure his permission to work in the parish as part of the Institutional Review Board process.

and this country, our relationships to one another as Catholics, and what it means to be a communion of churches. While she nodded her head abruptly as though to signal I had said enough to answer her question, Father John, Basil, Deacon Youssef, and another woman named Amira smiled at me and showed signs of interest. Both Basil and Amira told me to find them after the Divine Liturgy one Sunday and they would be happy to do an interview to help me with my research.

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In the 2022 *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research*, Watkins argues that a spiritual turn among some ethnographers may point toward greater integration between the epistemologies of qualitative methods and theological inquiry. This spiritual turn is motivated by a fundamental theology of revelation that recognizes how, in addition to Scripture and tradition, attentiveness to everyday, concrete life becomes a locus of the divine.[56] And yet this world is also painfully broken. We inhabit violent histories and contemporary suffering that reflect our sense of fragmentation within selves, between selves, with the environment, and with God. Theologians who employ ethnographic methods desire to develop spiritual practices that bear witness not only to the doctrine of the Trinity as God-with-us[57] but also to the conviction that this God is with us amid sinful divisions and wounds. Attentiveness to the divine reorients important ethnographic habits to what Pope Francis calls the "peculiar task" of theologians.[58]

Francis encourages theologians to go beyond desk-bound theologies and encounter people in their existential situations, noting how theologians should "do theology in a synodal form, promoting among themselves the ability to listen, dialogue, discern, and integrate" a multiplicity of issues.[59] Moreover, because theology bears a "pastoral stamp . . . theological reflection is encouraged to develop an inductive method that starts from the different contexts and concrete situations of various peoples, allowing themselves to be seriously challenged by reality, in order to discern the 'signs of the times.'"[60] In many ways, Francis's call for theology to be rethought methodologically and epistemologically in light of existential wounds affirms the value of Healy's proposal for an ethnographic ecclesiology that helps the church *in via* to better follow St. Paul's rule to boast in nothing but Christ crucified. Reorienting ethnographic habits like participation, reflexivity, and listening to the building up of the kingdom of God helps theologians better discern "the Trinitarian imprint" in reality's "web of relationships."[61] I turn to consider each of these three habits as spiritual components of an ethnographic ecclesiology.

56. *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), §8, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.
57. Clare Watkins, "Qualitative Research in Theology: A Spiritual Turn?," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research*, ed. Pete Ward and Knut Tveitereid (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2002), 16.
58. *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, §4.
59. *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, §6.
60. *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, §8.
61. *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, §4.

First, in terms of reorienting the ethnographic habit of participation to spiritual discernment, Paul S. Fiddes agrees with Cardinal Avery Dulles that the inherent mystery of the divine cannot be known by scientific experimentation or verification. He further notes that just as we cannot claim complete knowledge of the transcendent God, we also cannot claim to fully grasp, master, or define the *imago Dei* present in the human other. Rather than imitate the natural sciences in the creation of analogical models, he argues that the mystery of *both* the divine and human other can be known only through participation, or as Francis suggests, encounter.[62] By engaging in the sustained attention required through participant observation and ethnographic fieldwork, the theologian can only hope to develop a deepened awareness of the other by receiving them and their insights as gifts in ongoing relationship.

Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen also note that there is an "inescapable dimension of vulnerability" in the decentering yet embodied practice of participant observation in fieldwork—of learning from "people—their words, practices, traditions, experiences, memories, insights—in particular times and places in order to understand how they [discover and] make meaning."[63] There is a certain risk in going to or beyond the peripheries of one's comfort, especially to places where one does not immediately find a sense of belonging or know "what to do, what to ask, or even how to 'be.'"[64] And yet the inductive nature of sustained participation resists any attempt to rush to closure and secure one's stability in the unknown. The parallels with the synodal habits that Pope Francis wishes the global church to develop cannot be overlooked. Encountering difference is not always an immediately comfortable experience. Because of human sin and finitude, relationships across difference are only as strong as trust allows. Vulnerability before the other risks rejection for the possibility—not the guarantee—of revelation through deeper relationship, which takes time to build.

Second, ethnographic ecclesiology also maintains self-reflexivity as a means of remaining open to the mystery of the other and the potential of being changed or converted by what is encountered. Because ethnographic methods provide "a path *by which* truth emerges, rather than a way to apply truth,"[65] the researcher must approach the field with a genuine openness to what may arise. Theologians are not to come in as experts who impose their expertise onto the dynamic, lived realities of others; they should hold their theories lightly as they encounter the other in their fullest mystery. Reflexivity means "that the researcher is willing to look honestly at one's self—location, biases, etc. . . . as a way to guard against violating those from who we seek to learn."[66] Cultivating reflexive self-critique in ecclesiology properly aligns with the

62. Paul S. Fiddes, "Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Disciplines, Two Worlds?," in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 26.
63. Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2011), 16.
64. Sharen and Vigen, *Ethnography*, 59.
65. Sharen and Vigen, 17.
66. Scharen and Vigen, 19–20.

pilgrim nature of the church. This practice reflects a church of believers, often including the theologian doing fieldwork, ever in need of reform and renewal.

In my experience, the reoriented ethnographic habits of participation and reflexivity encourage the development of a kenotic spirituality of attention akin to Simone Weil's views in her essay collection entitled *Waiting for God*. Weil argues that if a person sincerely desires truth, then she remains attentive by cultivating a receptivity within herself that "consists of suspending [her] thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready" to receive that insight of truth just beyond her horizon. At the same time, she must hold in mind "the diverse knowledge [she has] acquired which [she is] forced to make use of," but "on a lower level and not in contact" with that space of receptivity to divine inspiration.[67] All judgment errors and faulty connections between ideas, Weil argues, are made when she has "seized upon some idea too hastily, and being thus prematurely blocked, is not open to truth."[68] When a person grasps an answer according to her limited understanding, she often discovers counterfeits that leave her unsatisfied even as she is unable to name why. Instead of rushing to a false sense of closure, she must endure the pain of erasing lie after lie, refusing to attach herself to any of them until she discovers that "little fragment of particular truth," which is an "image of the unique, eternal, and living Truth, the very Truth that once in a human voice declared: 'I am the Truth.'"[69] This epistemological stance reoriented to the building up of the kingdom of God emphasizes that the ethnographic ecclesiologist is not an academic agnostic but a "theologically positioned subject" who discerns intersubjectively.[70]

Third, for both Pope Francis and ethnographic ecclesiologists, the habit of listening becomes spiritual when it leads to more than simply hearing. Hearing affirms preconceived biases, but listening invites all involved to be present to deeper truths that may lie beneath the surface. In an address to the bishops on the fiftieth anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, Francis stated that "a synodal Church is a Church which listens . . . it is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the 'Spirit of truth' (Jn 14:17), in order to know what he 'says to the Churches' (Rev 2:7)."[71] His mature pneumatology is rooted in the conciliar teaching on the sense of the faithful.[72] He expresses this conviction clearly in *Evangelii Gaudium* when he states that the "presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp

67. Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," in Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2021), 67.
68. Weil, "Reflections," 67.
69. Weil, 67.
70. Healy, *Church*, 180.
71. Francis, "Address: Commemorative Ceremony for the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops" (October 17, 2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.
72. Gaillardetz, *An Unfinished Council*, 123.

those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression."[73] A year later, he told the International Theological Commission that it is the task of the theologian, who is "above all, a believer" to "humbly listen to what the Spirit tells the Church through the different manifestations of faith lived by the People of God."[74] Because of the presence of the Holy Spirit through this connaturality, theologians must engage in a practice of spiritual discernment.

Discerning a Trinitarian Imprint: The Witness and Discipleship of Melkite Catholics

I came early for the Arabic liturgy the Sunday after Myrna's visit in spring 2016. Sitting in the dark, mostly empty sanctuary, I found a few quiet moments for prayer. Minutes later, the altar behind the golden iconostasis lit up, and I could hear Father John's voice emerging from inside as he started preparing for the liturgy. People began to arrive one after the other. Basil flashed a quick smile at me as he helped his elderly mother enter the pew in front of me. Amira walked in with her husband and daughter and waved a brief hello before taking her seat in one of the pews on the left. The main cantor walked in about fifteen minutes after the liturgy began and sheepishly grinned at the crowd as he quickly flipped open the book and led the congregation in chanting with his rich baritone voice. As everything fell into place, I realized how comfortable I had become with the Melkite liturgy over the past few months and how much I appreciated the casual everyday rhythms of this community's ecclesial life.

During the homily, Father John reflected on Myrna's visit the evening before and highlighted how miracles were always in service to the message. He noted how during Myrna's previous visits, people were more interested in the oil pouring from the Marian image than they were in being attentive to the actual message of Christ's love and purpose for Middle Eastern Christians. Though fewer people came to the visit the night before, those who did attend came because of faith. He closed his reflections by emphasizing Myrna's simple but not simplistic words: "If there is no love, there is no forgiveness. If there is no forgiveness, there is no unity." These are the words of discipleship. This is what it means to follow Jesus.

At the close of the liturgy, we all proceeded to the front to kiss the cross and receive the remainder of the eucharistic bread. As soon as I finished eating the bread, I made sure to reconnect with Amira's daughter Camilla, who was about my age and was also working on a dissertation in history. We had become good friends over the past few months, and she helped me understand many of the dynamics that I observed at the cathedral. As we walked down the stairs to the basement, Basil tapped me on the shoulder and told me that he would meet me downstairs for our

73. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), §119, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

74. Vatican Information Service, Year 22, Num 217 (December 5, 2014), as cited in Gaillardetz, *An Unfinished Council*, 123.

interview after he dropped his mother off at home. About an hour later, Basil returned, and we found a quiet space in a corner of the hall after most of the other parishioners left.

Among the many insights he shared, he reflected on the difficulties of navigating multiple Arab cultures as one church. He noted when the church was in the South End, it was the center of social life for the Middle Eastern immigrant community. There were no cars, and everyone walked to the church. He continued:

> *[My father] was a cantor in the church, and he practically lived here at the church. Saturday evening, there was liturgy at 5:00 p.m., and he'd be here for that. Sunday, English and the Arabic, he'd be here for both. He would sing on Sunday and help out. I also was in the choir with him. My only thing was that I would sing the Our Father in Arabic every Sunday on the microphone. That was enough for me. That's all I could handle [he laughs]. Between that on the weekends, and then Monday was board meetings which kids didn't go to particularly, Tuesday was Bingo night, so everybody came to help out, the kids, the youth groups. Wednesday was Melkite Diocesan meeting . . . so either my mom or him or both would end up at those . . . Thursday was Boy Scouts, so we were back here again. Friday was an open night, and then we repeat with the weekend liturgies.*[75]

During those times, he was active in the youth group and often attended retreats and conventions with other American-born children. Everything was moving toward English after the Second Vatican Council, and there was a clear sense of needing the courage to embrace their identity as fully Arab American Melkite Catholics.

Basil longed for the days when everyone got along, but in 1975, civil war broke out in Lebanon. Syria got involved the next year. The turmoil in the Middle East brought huge waves of immigrants fleeing one war after another, which continues into the present day. Basil shared how this crisis impacts the church:

> *The community has changed. . . . Now we're getting a lot of different people from different countries. There's not a lot of unity. There's a lot of distance. Groups split off onto their own. You can see it if you come down to the basement if you look at the tables. You don't see everyone mingling. You see people sitting here and there. . . . The politics, it really transfers here from the Middle East. And it's unfortunate. They can't leave it at the front door before they come in. They bring it in, and they bring it down here [to the basement], and you hear it. . . . The loud guys, you hear them talking about it all the time . . .*[76]

I could feel Basil's anguish as he talked about the divisions of war present among his fellow parishioners and how different his current experience of church felt from the days of his youth. The divisiveness was too much for his Protestant wife and their teenage children, who chose to attend a different church on Sundays. It only felt natural for me to ask why he stayed committed to the Melkite Catholic Church after witnessing all this. I was struck by his response.

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75. Melkite Person, third interview by Jaisy A. Joseph, May 15, 2016.
76. Melkite Person, third interview.

> *It really feels like there is a lot of dust swirling around right now, Jaisy, and it's a wonder of how it's going to settle and is there anything that can be done. . . . I don't know. I feel like God wants me to stay here and not abandon this, so whatever little way I can, I want to spread the Christian message to this parish, even if it's one at a time. You were here last night, right? With Myrna? Each person must start with himself and within themselves . . . each person. We are all responsible for this church. Only then can we have unity.*[77]

Amira also shared with me how Myrna's story and what she called the "miracle of Damascus" convinced her to stay in the cathedral and work toward unity. Unlike Basil, who was raised in Boston's diasporic Melkite community, Amira was raised Roman Catholic in Damascus and married an Orthodox man. However, when she immigrated to Boston more than thirty years ago, she was committed to finding an Arab Catholic community that felt like home. In Syria, there was more fluidity between the various Christian denominations, especially as minorities in predominantly Muslim contexts. However, she often felt burdened by the denominational splits, especially in relation to the Eucharist. She recalled a visit to

> *the Holy Land, the Holy Sepulcher . . . and I had the chance to spend like the whole night. God gave me this grace, my daughter and I and one seminarian. We prayed. We spent hours and hours by Jesus's tomb. I wanted to go to mass, and there were three masses . . . and the first one was Greek Orthodox, so I went . . . and the seminarian who was Roman Catholic came with us. And one deacon, he asked the seminarian, "What are you doing here?" It was a couple of deacons and one priest and not too many people were there . . . and we were sitting exactly where Jesus was crucified. And the deacon decided to crucify Jesus again. He asked the seminarian, "Are you Orthodox?" And the seminarian is not going to lie. He said no. And the deacon said, "Okay, you can leave." So that tells you something.*
>
> *And to tell you the truth, it happened with me. He asked me, "Are you Orthodox?" I shook my head no, and then he didn't say leave. He didn't tell me or my daughter to leave. Maybe he saw we were really worshipping, you know. We were really there, one hundred percent. We were with Jesus. And then, I felt like all the time I was so stressed, why did he do to the seminarian this way. I couldn't have communion. During communion, he said, "Come and have communion." I said no because I was so stressed. I don't have communion when I'm stressed [she laughs]. And I felt so sorry for the seminarian. And the deacon invited me to have Eucharist, and I said, "No, that's okay." And then the mass, the liturgy finished, and I went away from Jesus's tomb heartbroken.*[78]

She described how this divisive mentality is present among Arab Christians in the diaspora. Amira believed something was hurting the spirituality of her people, and she prayed about it often. Many of the more recent immigrants, she believed, came to church to recreate Middle Eastern village life but were not focused on growing spiritually. She felt called to accompany them and show them there is so much more that Jesus intends for them.

77. Melkite Person, third interview.
78. Melkite Person, second interview by Jaisy A. Joseph, January 10, 2016.

> *I feel like God helped me to stay in this church, to work for more unity. As long as we belong to the pope, maybe this Melkite church is going to be the start of the unity with Orthodox. Our Lord is asking for this unity, so I'm praying for that. And besides, what's encouraging me is not just instinct but the miracle of Damascus and the apparitions to Myrna in Soufanieh. All the messages from our Blessed Mother and Jesus to her. Myrna is Melkite, but her husband is Orthodox. So why [did] our Blessed Mother come to a Melkite lady and [ask] for unity? That situation, more than anything else, encouraged me to stay in this church. Because I understood that our Blessed Mother wants us to start maybe from here and through the Melkite church maybe end up in unity. This is my feeling. That's why I'm staying here forever . . . I have to really just keep approaching the people to come closer to Jesus by being loving and forgiving. That's it, that summarizes everything . . . love and forgive, love and forgive. This is how we work for more unity.*[79]

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At the end of the festschrift written in his honor, Komonchak reflected on how a sixth model of the church as a "community of disciples" was added to the last edition of Dulles's *Models of the Church*. However, he argued that this concept should not be considered a model like others. Rather, it

> designated instead that to which all images and models point and refer. . . . With that term one returns to the very old designation of the church as the *congregatio* (or *convocatio*) *fidelium*, the assembly of believers, as the reality the images describe and the models try to understand. Then it is the everyday church, the church constituted and motivated in the world of common sense, of existential history, that is the object of ecclesiology.[80]

Healy's methodological proposal for studying this everyday church through ethnographic ecclesiology focuses not on the abstract or ideal but on how distinct ecclesial contexts shape various expressions of witness and discipleship *in via*. Adopting this methodology, my fieldwork examines the concrete ecclesial life of Melkite Catholics in the greater Boston area and discerns how their sense of vocation as Arab Americans influences their response to the Gospel between the Roman Catholic and Byzantine Orthodox worlds.

For decades, Myrna's powerful witness has consistently emphasized the message of unity rooted in Christ's prayer "that they may all be one" (Jn 17:21). The history of continuous warfare, the painful experience of ISIS terror, and the desperate migration from the Holy Land shape the ecclesial context through which discipleship is expressed at Our Lady of the Annunciation Melkite Cathedral. She reflects on how the vocation of every Middle Eastern Christian, whether at home or abroad, is to pray for unity not just through words directed to God but through how they live their lives. Myrna also challenges her audience to live with integrity by asking them to reflect on how they can "stand before God crying out for mercy amid constant crisis in the Middle East

79. Melkite Person, second interview.

80. Joseph A. Komonchak, "Some Grateful Reflections," in *A Realist's Church: Essays in Honor of Joseph A. Komonchak*, ed. Christopher D. Denny, Patrick J. Hayes, and Nicholas K. Rademacher (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 24.

without also working toward the unity that Christ so ardently desires in our lives." The brutality of war and terror reveals the horrific extent of division that results from sin, and yet the church must not replicate this sin within itself.

She highlights that unity is not an abstract quality of the church but a reality made possible through the personal decisions of each baptized person as a living stone that builds up the one church. The lessons of unity, which involve "reconciliation, love, and acceptance of other's differences," are learned in the family and then directed outward into the ecclesial community and wider world. Father John would emphasize these lessons the next day in his Sunday homily. He not only repeats Myrna's words that "if there is no love, there is no forgiveness. If there is no forgiveness, there is no unity," but also explicitly describes these lessons as the "words of discipleship. This is what it means to follow Jesus."

Myrna's authority comes not from theological argumentation or clerical status but from a life transformed by an encounter with God and a desire to live with integrity thereafter. The authenticity of her witness is verified by the discipleship she inspires in others. For example, Basil depicts the difficult diasporic realities of constant migration shaped by crisis in the Middle East. As an American-born Melkite Catholic, he wrestles with what it means to follow Jesus in an ecclesial context shaped by various and conflicting national loyalties.

In 1970, Archbishop Joseph Tawil reflected on these tensions in his Christmas pastoral letter, "The Courage to Be Ourselves." This letter served as a catalyst for the renewal of Melkite churches in the US in response to conciliar reforms. Speaking to the diasporic situation of Arab Americans, the letter specified the need to discern between two twin dangers: (1) the ghetto mentality, which is a danger to mission, and (2) assimilation, which is a danger to identity. Tawil argues that the Melkite church should not be closed in on itself and only in service to the ethnic character of the community. Melkite traditions, Tawil argues, are "not only for our own people but are also for any of our fellow Americans who are attracted to our traditions which show forth the beauty of the universal Church and the variety of its riches."[81] He also notes that while the church must embrace its American reality, it must not slip into the anonymity of continued Latinizations. Rather, the Melkite Catholic Church must resist spiritual assimilation and "preserve this authentic form of Christianity which is ours. . . . We must develop and maintain a religious tradition we know capable of enriching American life. Otherwise, we would be unfaithful to our vocation."[82]

In the context of diaspora, Myrna's witness inspires Basil to not be discouraged by the various tensions that threaten unity in his church. Rather, he believes, "God wants me to stay here and not abandon this, so whatever little way I can I want to spread the Christian message to this parish, even if it's one at a time . . . each person must start with himself and within themselves . . . each person. We are all

81. Archbishop Joseph Tawil, 1970 Christmas Pastoral Letter النسخة العربية, https://melkite.org/excerpt/the-courage-to-be-ourselves, §4.
82. Tawil, 1970 Christmas Pastoral Letter, §5.

responsible for this church. Only then can we have unity." This interior conviction helps him to realistically perceive how human sin and finitude shape his ecclesial context without losing hope.

Myrna's witness also inspires Amira's discipleship as she struggles to forge unity between the distinct ecumenical tensions that shape her concrete experience of the church. She shares a powerful story of how she left Jesus's tomb heartbroken after experiencing the lack of eucharistic hospitality between Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians. She describes this division between Christians as an act that continues to crucify Jesus in the present day. She draws inspiration, however, from the fact that both Jesus and the Blessed Mother chose Myrna, a Melkite Catholic woman married to an Orthodox man, to plea for unity. The miracle of Damascus inspires Amira to continue working toward ecumenical unity by living unity through the concrete practices of love and forgiveness. For her, "that's it, that summarizes everything . . . love and forgive, love and forgive. That is how we work for more unity."

Amira's conviction reveals a deep-seated consciousness that echoes the ecumenical vocation of Eastern Catholics articulated in Tawil's letter. Tawil quotes the famous words of the late Patriarch Maximos IV, who played a pivotal role at the Second Vatican Council:

> We have, therefore, a two-fold mission to accomplish within the Catholic Church. We must fight to insure that latinism and Catholicism are not synonymous, that Catholicism remains open to every culture, every spirit, and every form of organization compatible with the unity of faith and love. At the same time, by our example, we must enable the Orthodox Church to recognize that a union with the great Church of the West, with the See of Peter, can be achieved without being compelled to give up Orthodoxy or any of the spiritual treasures of the apostolic and patristic East, which is opened toward the future no less to the past.[83]

As living bearers of a unique tradition in the United States, the diasporic consciousness of Arab American Melkite Catholics challenges theologians and the wider church to learn from the particular forms of witness and discipleship that emerge from their concrete existential wounds. Choosing "one particular context is not to abdicate responsibility for a comprehensive ecclesiology, but to recognize that it is of the nature of a more empirical or inductive method to start from the local and build up toward the more universal."[84] Moreover, by focusing on the particular, it becomes possible for ecclesiologists to better discern the work of the economic Trinity in the *exitus-reditus* reality of the church.[85] As wayfarers *in via*, neither Basil nor Amira come to the cathedral with a consumerist mentality that picks and chooses what is most therapeutic for them. Rather, both express a clear commitment to freely endure suffering for the sake of the whole. Both are willing to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Christ because of the powerful witness of another who does so for them.

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83. Tawil, §3.
84. Paul Lakeland, *Church: Living Communion* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 130.
85. Healy, "Practices," 303–4.

Ecclesiologists must contend with the significance of the cross that lies at the center of conversion in the concrete and messy realities of human existence. In each distinct ecclesial context, witness and discipleship are shaped by the necessity of taking up this cross in a world marked by sin and finitude and working toward the hope of the resurrection. At the end of *Foundations in Ecclesiology*, Komonchak argues that the

> message of the Cross embodies the challenge to accept that the problem of evil is not capable of a theoretical solution, whether philosophical or theological, and that it is truly met only practically, in the refusal to add to the mass and momentum of sin and evil and in a love that would rather suffer than injure, die than kill.[86]

By taking seriously Francis's *motu proprio* for theology to be rethought both methodologically and epistemologically through an "openness to the world, to human persons in the concreteness of their existential situations, with their problems, their wounds, their challenges, their potential,"[87] an ethnographic ecclesiology reoriented to the building up of the kingdom of God helps the church *in via* to boast in nothing but Christ crucified. Such grace, however, is only possible through a communal discernment led by the Holy Spirit.

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86. Komonchak, *Foundations*, 184–85.
87. *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, §3.