

## ELITIST TENDENCIES AND CONSUMER PRESSURES IN AMERICAN CATHOLICISM

First a word about the title of this paper. "Elitist tendencies" and "consumer pressures" are deliberately provocative terms chosen to designate two extremes in contemporary Catholic ecclesiology—one more properly a temptation for the professional theologians who serve the American Catholic community, the other more properly a temptation for the pastoral leadership of that community. As I reflected on the title I realized that the real problem was neither of these extremes but an unresolved tension between two views of the Church's basic mission in the modern world. Accordingly, the present paper might be better entitled *Mission and Membership: The Theological Problem and American Pastoral Practice*. There undoubtedly are theologians who so stress the need for the Church to be a pure sign community in the world that they would exclude from that community those whose Christian faith and apostolic zeal is not as robust as their own. Similarly, there undoubtedly are pastoral leaders in American Catholicism so concerned about not disturbing the faithful that they are willing to make considerable concessions to retain the institutional loyalty of those who might otherwise walk away sad. In fact, all of us somehow involved in both academic theology and pastoral ministry have probably experienced both these temptations. However, what is needed is not a lecture on avoiding either extreme but a theological analysis of the basic tension involved and a pastorally useful perspective for resolving that tension. That is what the present paper tries to offer.

### I. THE PROBLEM

Karl Rahner recently published a little book of theological advice for the national pastoral synod now underway in Germany.<sup>1</sup> Much of

<sup>1</sup>Karl Rahner, *Strukturwandel der Kirche als Aufgabe und Chance* (Freiburg: Herder, 1972). Rahner first introduced the notion of a Christian

Rahner's book is concerned with the specific structural changes he advocates for German Catholicism, but the overall context is provided by his discussion of the changed situation of the Christian community in a culturally post-Christian Germany. His central theme is the familiar one of the passage from a culturally supported *Volkskirche* to a numerically smaller but qualitatively stronger "church of free decision." His basic advice, however, is twofold: first, resist the pressure to withdraw into a self-imposed ghetto with no effective missionary presence in the surrounding culture, and second, remain "a church of open doors," tolerant of diversity, partial identification, and somewhat fluid membership boundaries. It is not immediately clear how these two imperatives are mutually compatible: a cultural minority church might be expected to require tighter discipline to maintain the purity of its witness. Nevertheless Rahner seems to see no conflict between his emphasis on the community's cultural mission and his concern for even its weaker members.

As I read Rahner's book, I asked myself how well his analysis applied to American Catholicism. The cultural situation is obviously different: America has never had a *Volkskirche*, at least not in the sense of prince-bishops and Vatican concordats.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, American Catholicism has only recently emerged from the sheltered existence of an immigrant church,<sup>3</sup> and cultural pressures on the

diaspora in "The Present Situation of Christians," *The Christian Commitment* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963), pp. 3-37; he has returned to it regularly over the years, most recently in "Das neue Bild der Kirche," *Schriften zur Theologie VIII* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1967), pp. 329-54. Cf. Yves Congar, *The Wide World. My Parish* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961).

<sup>2</sup>The basic pattern of American religious voluntaryism is well analyzed in Sidney Mead, *The Lively Experiment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963); D. B. Robertson, ed., *Voluntary Associations* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1966); and Elwyn A. Smith, ed., *The Religion of the Republic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

<sup>3</sup>David O'Brien traces recent historical developments in American Catholicism in *The Renewal of American Catholicism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972). Andrew Greeley covers some of the same ground, from a more sociological perspective, in *Why Can't They Be Like Us?* (New York: Dutton, 1971). Greeley's *The Denominational Society* (New York: Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1972) argues strongly for the continuing strength of "religious ethnicity" in contemporary America.

American Catholic community to withdraw into a privatized ghetto and "take care of its own" are real enough.<sup>4</sup> Rahner's dual pastoral advice raises more questions. In the context of American Catholicism, is his emphasis on the Church as a missionary sign community in a culturally post-Christian world really compatible with his concern for church membership, even for those whose motivation is mixed and whose allegiance is marginal? Rahner, no doubt, has a way of integrating his two imperatives, but my hunch is that they are not satisfactorily integrated in the theological reflection and pastoral practice of the American Catholic community. In fact, I would be inclined to locate one of the less obvious but more basic tensions within American Catholicism precisely in this area. Reform-minded theologians, reflecting critically on the praxis of the American Catholic community, call for quality over quantity in its membership and subordinate the needs of institutional self-maintenance to the community's mission of effective Christian presence in the world. A somewhat beleaguered pastoral leadership, on the other hand, takes as its primary responsibility caring for the needs of the Church's rank and file membership, not all of whom are passionately committed Christians. Here are two basic orientations in considerable tension.

For simplicity's sake, let us label these two perspectives. The first perspective, with considerable support in recent theological theory but little influence on current pastoral practice, I call the *sign-community* orientation. It views the Church primarily as a transforming sign of salvation in a non-Christian world. It is also concerned with the community's membership, of course, but tends to emphasize the need for full commitment and active participation by all the members of a

<sup>4</sup>Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967) provides a useful analysis of the privatizing pressures on organized religion in a pluralistic culture. Berger believes that the major public institutions of Western culture have been largely secularized: i.e., once legitimated in explicitly religious terms, they now tend to be legitimated in terms of merely proximate ends and pragmatic values. A weakened but still religious common cultural canopy perdures, however, and religion retains considerable salience in the private realm. In a pluralistic culture, the churches must compete for membership and are encouraged to keep out of controversial areas of public life. In *The Invisible Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), Thomas Luckmann predicts still further privatization of religion.

credible sign community. For the Church's basic mission is a mission *ad extra*, to the non-Christian world surrounding the community. The second perspective, with a long theological tradition behind it and enormous influence on current pastoral practice, I call the *source-of-salvation* orientation. It views the Church as primarily a source of salvation for those who either presently constitute its membership or can be brought into the community as new members. It too is concerned with missionary activity, but such missionary activity is ultimately ordered toward community growth rather than cultural presence. The Church's basic mission is a mission *ad intra*, to the actual or potential members for whom it mediates Christ's redemptive revelation. Thus both perspectives are concerned with mission and membership, but the basic orientations differ. The result is a smoldering conflict of apostolic priorities and competition for the allocation of the community's limited resources and manpower. Because the sign-community orientation is increasingly influential among the theologians of the American Catholic community and the source-of-salvation orientation is overwhelmingly dominant among the pastoral leadership which controls the apostolic resources of American Catholicism, this particular ecclesiological tension tends to surface as a conflict between a theologically sophisticated elite and those bearing the burden of direct pastoral responsibility in the Church. At least that is my suspicion.

## II. SIGN COMMUNITY: THEOLOGICAL THEORY

### A. Theory

Before trying to relate the two perspectives more closely, let us examine in more detail the theology behind the sign-community orientation.<sup>5</sup> The shift to a sign-community perspective among

<sup>5</sup>Richard McBrien's *Do We Need the Church?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) stimulated widespread American discussion of this new orientation. Building on the pioneering work of Rahner and Schillebeeckx, McBrien uses the eschatological perspective of Moltmann and Metz to analyze the Church's mission as the sign and instrument of God's kingdom in the world. On Moltmann's ecclesiology, cf. Martin Tripole, "Ecclesiological Developments in Moltmann's

professional Catholic ecclesiology has taken place very recently and very rapidly. Considering the weight of the centuries-old tradition behind what Richard McBrien calls Catholicism's "Ptolemaic" ecclesiology, it is really difficult to account for such a radical reversal of basic perspective in the few years since the Council.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, it is hardly surprising that the new orientation has not yet incorporated all that was valid in the old. Yet the new perspective is actually the result of a convergence of consensus on three very ancient questions in Catholic theology: the salvation of the non-Christian, the relationship of Church and kingdom, and the nature of sacramental causality.

### *The Salvation of the Non-Christian*

Certainly one of the most important factors in this "Copernican revolution" in Catholic ecclesiology has been a renewed interest in the reality of Christ's redemptive revelation outside of explicit Christianity.<sup>7</sup> The reasons for this are partially cultural, partially theological. The phenomenon of planetization, awareness of the secularity rampant in traditionally Christian cultures, the end of colonialism, attention focused on the world population explosion, and a new concern for non-Christian religious traditions have all contributed to a sudden realization that the vast majority of mankind has never

Theology of Hope," *Theological Studies* 34 (1973), 19-35. Metz develops the ecclesiological implications of his eschatology in *Theology of the World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969). McBrien's *Church: The Continuing Quest* (New York: Newman, 1970) restates his earlier position and reviews post-conciliar Catholic treatments of the question, discussing (among others) the work of Hillman, Dulles, Bianchi, Baum, and Küng, as well as the more recent writings of Rahner and Schillebeeckx. The work of two Latin American ecclesiology writers from a sign-community perspective has recently appeared in English; cf. Juan Segundo, *The Community Called Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973), and, for a more nuanced position, Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> McBrien summarizes this "Ptolemaic" ecclesiology and what he calls the "ambivalent" ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council in *Do We Need the Church?*, pp. 100-16 and 119-66, and *Church: The Continuing Quest*, pp. 23-41.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Davis offers a balanced discussion of the problem and a good introduction to the recent literature in *Christ and the World Religions* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971).

been exposed to effective Christian proclamation and that the percentage of the world's population which calls itself Christian is shrinking rapidly. Theologically, the universality of God's salvific will in Christ has been treated with a new seriousness. What was once a neglected scholion is now a central Christian conviction: God wills all men to be saved; it is God alone who saves; there is ultimately only one salvation for all mankind; the only God there is is the triune God of whom the Second Person has become incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth; therefore all men and not just some are *somehow* offered an opportunity to respond to Christ's redemptive revelation. Precisely *how* men with no effective contact with explicit Christian proclamation have an opportunity for salvation in Christ is a much disputed question, but *that* this is true is widely acknowledged. The new emphasis on grace as a personal union and salvation as demanding a conscious and free response on man's part makes the solution of this problem even more difficult.

Karl Rahner's much criticized theory of anonymous Christianity is probably the best known effort, but most recent Catholic studies of the question tend to make some similar distinction between explicit and implicit religious response and to identify man's effective love of his fellowmen as the crucial instance of both radical human commitment and implicit Christian revelation and response. Not all share Rahner's insistence that the non-Christian's religious and even cultural community plays a positive role in mediating this ultimate option, but Rahner's extension of Catholicism's traditional sacramental principle to non-Christian religious communities seems basically sound.<sup>8</sup>

At any rate, the upshot of the whole discussion has been to eliminate membership in the Christian community as an indispensable, life-or-death condition for salvation in Christ. There is no salvation outside of Christ, but for most men, it seems, the question of salvation is decided apart from formal allegiance to explicit Christianity. Whatever mission the Church has with regard to its own members and whatever urgency it sees in the task of attracting new members, it can

<sup>8</sup>Rahner's most recent formulation of his position, with extensive references to other Catholic contributions, is "Bemerkungen zum Problem des 'Anonymen Christen,'" *Schriften zur Theologie X* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1972), pp. 531-46.

no longer practically identify the question of Christian salvation with the question of membership in the Christian community.<sup>9</sup> Again in McBrien's words, the Church can no longer consider itself as the ordinary means of salvation for most men.

### *Church and Kingdom*

Another major factor behind the sign-community orientation of contemporary Catholic ecclesiology is a much more sophisticated treatment of the relationship between the Church and the kingdom of God.<sup>10</sup> This development is actually quite parallel to the new consensus concerning the presence of "implicit" Christian revelation and response outside the boundaries of the explicit Christian community. While traditional Catholic ecclesiology tended almost to identify Church and kingdom, recent exegetical and systematic studies have emphasized their distinction. Jesus himself proclaimed the coming kingdom of God and spoke little, if at all, of the Church. He was undoubtedly concerned to gather disciples around himself and probably prepared to some extent for an "interim" period after his death, but his central message was "turn away from your sins, for the kingdom of God is near." Similarly the early Church, though gradually coming to terms with the realization that the definitive establishment of the kingdom was not imminent, consistently viewed its own mission in terms of that coming eschatological kingdom. This is not to say that the apostolic Church was unconcerned with its own growth and with

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Karl Rahner, "Anonymes Christentum und Missionsauftrag der Kirche," *Schriften zur Theologie IX* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1970), pp. 498-515.

<sup>10</sup>A review of recent studies of New Testament eschatology and the biblical doctrine of the kingdom is provided by David Stanley in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968), pp. 777-84. Hans Küng stresses the distinction of church and kingdom in his analysis of the New Testament texts and recent exegetical literature; cf. *The Church* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1968), pp. 41-104. McBrien's view of the relationship of church and kingdom in the New Testament can be found in *Do We Need the Church?*, pp. 81-99. Gerald O'Collins offers some criticisms of McBrien's position in "On Richard McBrien's *Do We Need the Church?*," *Heythrop Journal* 10 (1969), 416-19. Cf. also Oscar Cullmann's important essay on 1 Cor 15:24-28, "The Kingship of Christ and the Church in the New Testament," *The Early Church* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1956), pp. 105-37.

mediating salvation to its members. On the contrary, the letters of Paul and the community self-understanding reflected in *Acts* display a passionate concern with new converts and pastoral care of the established communities. Yet salvation, though experienced as a present reality in these early Christian communities, was always an imperfectly realized reality, the first fruits of a still outstanding eschatological fulfillment. Such inaugurated eschatology, with its tension between the "already present" and the "not yet present" and its strong sense of community solidarity, pointed the apostolic Church toward the future as a pilgrim community of hope. Only with the definitive establishment of God's kingdom would God's salvific love in Christ reach its final fulfillment.

More importantly, the early Church was very conscious of the universal significance of the kingdom of salvation inaugurated in Christ. Christ died for all and not just for some. In Christ the Father was reconciling the whole world to himself. All men were called to the salvation of which Christ was the one mediator, and thus all men were called to enter the kingdom of his Father. Furthermore, just as the Church paradoxically shared in Christ's unique mission of mediation, so, somehow, this gathered people, Christ's body, paradoxically shared in the realization of that coming kingdom which only God could realize. God's kingdom of salvation, effective in the reign of Christ, was, however, larger than the Church as well as ahead of the Church, just as Christ's mediation was accorded cosmic significance and never exclusively identified with the boundaries of the explicit Christian community at any given period of human history. For all its emphasis on community growth and pastoral care, the apostolic Church was directed beyond itself to the coming kingdom it served in its service of Christ, a kingdom it refused to identify with itself even as it claimed to be an initial realization of its presence in the world.

This review of the New Testament evidence on the complex relationship between Church and kingdom reflects, I hope, a balanced summary of recent exegetical work. It should also make it clear that the New Testament provides few ready-made answers to current systematic questions about apostolic priorities in the Church's basic mission. The various texts on the kingdom (some pre-Easter in origin but all incorporated into the witness of a post-Easter Church quite concerned

with its own growth and internal affairs) are difficult to synthesize. The concept of the kingdom of God remains a powerful but imprecise image that needs to be carefully related to other central concepts in the apostolic Church's basic kerygma of salvation-from-sin-in-Christ. Nevertheless, coupled with an emerging consensus on the extensive presence of "implicit" Christian revelation and response outside the boundaries of the explicit Christian community, the refusal of the New Testament to simply identify Church and kingdom does support contemporary Catholic theologians who criticize the Church's traditional "Ptolemaic" ecclesiology in favor of a less self-centered notion of the Church's basic mission.

### *Efficacious Symbolic Communication*

A third major factor behind the sign-community orientation of current Catholic ecclesiology is the twentieth-century renaissance of Catholic sacramental theology.<sup>11</sup> This renaissance has produced new and sophisticated insights into the transforming power of what Rahner calls "realizing symbols" (*Realsymbole*). Such "intrinsic" symbols do more than point to the reality they represent. They actually make that reality present, precisely by symbolizing it. What is symbolized is really present and efficacious in the symbol, even though the reality symbolized cannot be simply identified with the symbol which expresses it. Realizing symbols are primarily *events* of interpersonal communication, not merely the material objects used in such symbolic communication. As communication events they involve at least minimal

<sup>11</sup>In addition to Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963) and "The Church as the Sacrament of Dialogue," *God the Future of Man* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1968), pp. 117-40, cf. Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), and "The Theology of the Symbol," *Theological Investigations IV* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), pp. 221-52. Rahner summarizes his more recent thought on Christian sacramental activity in "Überlegungen zum personalen Vollzug des sakramentalen Geschehens," *Schriften zur Theologie X* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1972), pp. 405-29. Leonardo Boff provides a massive analysis of the history and current status of this sign-community orientation in his *Die Kirche als Sakrament im Horizont der Welterfahrung: Versuch einer Legitimation und einer struktur-funktionalistischen Grundlegung der Kirche* (Paderborn: Bonifacius-Druckerei, 1972).

participation by the recipient of the communication; otherwise there is no genuine communication, only an unsuccessful effort at communication. Similarly, as communication events, they have as their ultimate criterion of effective presence what is actually shared with the recipient of the symbolic communication, not the good intentions of the one communicating or the "objective" qualities of the symbol itself (though different symbols are obviously suitable for different audiences). Realizing symbols are intended to be efficacious, to change the personal reality of the recipients of such symbolic communication.

This renewed appreciation of the power and complexity of interpersonal symbolic communication was initially applied by Catholic theologians to the understanding of the Church's seven sacraments (as efficacious signs of grace). Next it was extended to an analysis of the Church itself as the basic sacrament of Christ, a realizing symbol expressing Christ's light and love to the faithful through the community's ministry of word and sacrament. Finally, with the shift to a less ecclesiocentric vision of the Church's basic mission, these new insights into efficacious sign-presence have been utilized to express the basic mission of the Church as a sign community of Christian presence to a world outside the boundaries of the explicit Christian community but not outside the sphere of Christ's redemptive revelation and the kingdom of God now being initiated.

This vision of the Church's mission as the "sacrament of the world's salvation" clearly implies new apostolic priorities for the community and a formidable challenge for Catholic ecclesialogists. As a community of symbolic communication with the world, the Church must become a Church of dialogue with that world, concerned with bringing to fruition the salvific presence of Christ's redemptive revelation in all things human, critical of whatever in the human community impedes this redemptive process or absolutizes what is only a partial and provisional manifestation of God's coming kingdom. The community's theologians and pastoral leaders must cooperate to spell out the Church's essential functions in the light of this basic mission and reform its central structures to serve those functions more effectively. Its ecclesialogists must employ whatever is helpful in contemporary communications research and cybernetic theory to clarify and evaluate the effectiveness of the Church's symbolic

communication with the world.<sup>12</sup> They must dialogue with sociologists to understand the cultural dynamics of that world and the mutual interaction of Church and culture. They must work out the theory and help direct the practice of incarnating the Church's re-presentation of Christ's light and love in effective Christian action, helping the Christian community cooperate with other communities of concern in the world while retaining its own Christian identity.<sup>13</sup>

#### B. Critique

All in all, an exciting vision, but one not without its difficulties, both theological and pastoral. I would like to touch upon a central pastoral difficulty in the concluding section of this paper. But some theological reservations must be noted first.

I personally believe that the basic theological thrust of this sign-community orientation is valid. Difficulties arise not so much over what its proponents say as over what they do not say (or do not say loudly or often enough). I would signal out three points for further comment.

I would first of all tend to emphasize much more than some of the current literature does that the reality of salvation outside the boundaries of explicit Christianity is really (though implicitly) *Christian* salvation, the transforming presence of God-in-Christ uniting man to himself and so liberating and fulfilling the frustrated potential of man's world. Anything else, I am afraid, involves playing theological games. A faith community which believes that man's ultimate salvation is from God and that the only God there is is the triune God of whom the Second Person has become incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth simply cannot maintain that God is at work where Christ is not at work. Clearly Christ is present in the world through other mediations than the

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Bernard Donahue, "Political Ecclesiology," *Theological Studies* 33 (1972), 294-306, and Patrick Granfield, *Ecclesial Cybernetics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), though both of these studies are primarily concerned with the Church's internal communication system.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. J.-B. Metz, *Theology of the World*,; Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*; and Helmut Peukert. (Hrsg.) *Diskussion zur "Politischen Theologie"* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1969), especially the contributions of Lehmann, Rahner, and Metz.

ministry of the explicit Christian community. In this sense it is legitimate to speak of the non-Christian world or the salvation of non-Christians. But I do not think Christians can consistently speak of non-Christian salvation in the literal sense of union with God not mediated by Christ.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly I would recommend a more discriminating presentation of the thesis that the inaugurated presence of God's kingdom in the world is to be identified with the presence of genuine human love and the authentic human community such love produces.<sup>15</sup> The whole question of what is genuine human love and what is authentic human community must be examined from a Christian perspective if one is doing Christian theology. Christianity involves a humanism, but a humanism that builds a relationship to God into its very definition of man.<sup>16</sup> Christian theology certainly affirms a mysterious unity between

<sup>14</sup>This dogmatic position, of course, should not be used to justify Christian parochialism or an arrogant stance toward "paganism": precisely because they believe Christ is at work outside the boundaries of the explicit Christian community, Christians should be ready to learn from non-Christian religious traditions.

<sup>15</sup>For an example of this thesis, cf. Juan Segundo, *The Community Called Church*. In somewhat Barthian tones, Segundo denies the presence of Christ's revelation outside the explicit Christian community (*ibid.*, p. 11); a Christian is "one who already knows" (*ibid.*, p. 11 and *passim*); non-Christian religions do not in themselves mediate man's knowledge of God (*ibid.*, pp. 63-67). On the other hand, all men have access to God's redemption insofar as they love one another: "Unless they fall back through evil intentions, all men travel the same road, and it leads them to salvation; it is the road of self-giving through love. The journey is common to all men, who are turned in the right direction by a law that God has placed in their hearts. The only thing is that some people on this road, through God's revelation, know something that relates to all; they know the mystery of the journey" (*ibid.*, p. 32). Segundo, of course, sees God as the ultimate source and goal of all genuine human love. But I suspect more emphasis must be placed on the real (though perhaps only implicit) knowledge of God involved in redemptive love of the neighbor, a knowledge often mediated by the non-Christian's own religious community; cf. Karl Rahner, "On the Unity of Love of God and Love of Neighbor," *Theological Investigations VI* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969), pp. 231-49.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Karl Rahner, "Christlicher Humanismus," *Schriften zur Theologie VIII* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1967), pp. 239-59, and "Heilsauftrag der Kirche und

love of God and love of neighbor, but the mystery is not respected by eliminating one of its basic components. Matthew's last judgment parable is not the whole New Testament and must not be interpreted as though it were.<sup>17</sup> The kingdom dawns wherever salvation comes to man in his human community, but Christian salvation involves the ultimate liberation and fulfillment of man, and human love only liberates and fulfills man ultimately if it unites him, explicitly or implicitly, to God as well as to Christ's brothers and sisters. Indeed, it is precisely the acceptance of God's transforming love (even if experienced only "anonymously," in the love shown by one's fellowmen) that allows man to treat his fellowmen as God has treated him and so build an authentic human community based on genuine human love.

Finally I would suggest that much more attention be paid to the Christian sign community as an *efficacious* symbol of the world's salvation. This sign community, it is true, functions as an instrument of God's inaugurated kingdom not by mediating Christian redemption in a world where such redemption is otherwise simply absent but by making the light and love of Christ explicitly present in a world where it is already implicitly at work and bearing fruit. Yet the whole point of efficacious symbolic communication is missed if this mission is dismissed as a mere pointing to what already exists or a mere sharing of information which the world outside the boundaries of explicit Christianity does not as yet possess. Mediations make a difference,

Humanisierung der Welt," *Schriften zur Theologie X* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1972), pp. 547-67.

<sup>17</sup>As a matter of fact, whatever may have been the original point of this "parable," recent exegetical studies have tended to support the thesis that canonical Mt 25:40 ["Whenever you did this for one of the least important of these brothers of mine, you did it for me"] refers to the gentiles' treatment of the emissaries of the Christian community; no universal thesis of salvation through love of neighbor is implied. Cf. J. Winandy, "La scène du jugement dernier," *Sciences Ecclésiastiques* 18 (1966), 170-86; Lamar Cope, "Matthew 25:31-46: 'The Sheep and the Goats' Reconsidered," *Novum Testamentum* 11 (1969), 32-44; and Jean-Claude Ingelaere, "La 'parabole' du jugement dernier," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuse* 50 (1970), 23-60. Other frequently cited New Testament texts refer even more clearly to love shown to *members of the Christian community* as love shown to Christ himself.

sometimes a crucial difference. A realizing symbol is a transforming symbol. It transforms precisely by communicating not mere knowledge but presence incarnated in a meaningful mediation of the reality symbolized. Salvation in Christ can indeed be mediated through other symbols, and access to explicit Christian symbolization is not the life-or-death matter we once imagined it to be. But God is revealed to man only through finite mediations of his transforming presence, and man responds to God only through similarly incarnate expressions of his conscious commitment. Mediations of Christian revelation and response, explicit and implicit, clear and obscure, have *salvific* import, even though no particular mediation can itself be termed indispensable. In this age of God's merely inaugurated kingdom, salvation (conceived of as human liberation and fulfillment through union with God and the building up of the human community that accompanies this) is not an abstract state or static condition. It is a personal reality, individual and communal, always in process, constantly threatened by countervailing powers, necessarily dependent (as a human reality as well as a divine gift) on the symbolic mediations which express and help effect it. The Christian sign community, rightfully conscious of the reality of Christian redemption and God's inaugurated kingdom present in the world beyond its boundaries, should certainly become less self-centered in defining its mission. It must not identify the question of membership in the explicit Christian community with the larger questions of universal salvation and the reality of God's kingdom in the world. But I do not think the Church ought to surrender its consciousness of playing a central role in the efficacious expression (in word and deed) of what God has done in Christ and, in this sense, of constituting a central sign of God's coming kingdom that is of salvific significance for the world. *Christian salvation, explicit or implicit*, is affected by the symbols which mediate and help effect it.<sup>18</sup> As a sign community of explicit Christian presence in the world, the Church has a mission of salvific import for all humanity insofar as it is able to effectively communicate what it symbolizes to a world much larger than itself but still within the range of dialogue.

<sup>18</sup>In this sense I would say that those who have access to explicit Christian proclamation undeniably have not only more responsibility but also a concrete

### III. INTRINSIC SYMBOL OF THE WORLD'S SALVATION: PASTORAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the light of the preceding theological analysis and the qualifications introduced, I would now like to make some concluding observations on the central pastoral problem indicated at the beginning of this paper. I have argued that one of the basic tensions in contemporary American Catholicism is a relatively new theological vision of the Church as a sign community for the world in conflict with a more traditional pastoral emphasis on the Church as a channel of grace for its actual or potential members. If this is so, how can what is valid in the new theological vision be presented to the pastoral leaders of the American Catholic community in a way that will help them implement the considerable shift in apostolic priorities that vision implies? For one of the hard facts of life in American Catholicism is the enormous gap that exists between what its theologians say American Catholics ought to be doing and believing and what most American Catholics actually see themselves called to do and believe. In terms of our problem, most American Catholics undeniably view the Church as primarily a source of salvation for themselves, their fellow Christians, and those not yet in the fold who can be recruited as new members of the Christian community. In the light of this ecclesiology, the faithful entertain certain expectations and their pastoral leaders are conscious of certain responsibilities. The mission of symbolic communication of Christian presence to the world outside the boundaries of the explicit

advantage over those who do not. Otherwise, why should Christians be so anxious to share their explicit Christian mediations with others? God may in the end dispense his grace to all men with an even hand, and Christians certainly should be under no illusion that they do not have to work out their own salvation "in fear and trembling." But establishing that "there exists an equality of *subjective* possibility for all men with regard to salvation, holiness, and perfection" (Juan Segundo, *The Community Called Church*, p. 43) is really not the crucial question. Nor is it profitable to argue whether or not "God, by the free gift of his election, offers some few men a greater opportunity for human growth and maturity than He offers to others" (Richard McBrien, *Church: The Continuing Quest*, p. 63). The real question is whether the Church has anything to offer the world of *salvific* import. Unless the answer to this question is yes, there is no point in writing books about the Church's mission as a sign community in the world.

Christian community does not enjoy a high apostolic priority in the eyes of either group.

I suspect that the notion of the Church as an intrinsic symbol of the world's *salvation* may provide a connecting link between the two emphases. *The Church is supposed to be the place where salvation happens, but where salvation happens in such a way that the salvation happening elsewhere in the world is thereby illuminated, fostered, and summoned to further stages of purification and growth.* Several advantages attach to this way of stating the Church's basic mission.

First of all, the *outward* orientation of the Christian community is maintained. The Church must be a sign to the world. It must carry on its vital activities in the larger context of Christ's universal redemptive activity and the inaugurated presence of God's kingdom in the world. It exists to serve Christ and the kingdom which the Father is inaugurating through him, not to serve itself. Its concern for its own membership and growth must be subordinated to this more fundamental mission. God wills to bring all men into union with himself. In a world where not all men have been called to formal membership in the explicit Christian community, the Church's salvific mission cannot be limited to its actual or potential membership. As far as is humanly possible in God's design, it must communicate to the world outside its boundaries its own explicitly Christian mediation of this larger redemptive reality—a mediation it is convinced has salvific import insofar as it is actually shared with the world.

In addition, however, the emphasis on the Church as an *intrinsic* sign of salvation helps to clarify the relationship of the community's pastoral care of its own members and its concern for its own self-maintenance to its larger mission in the world outside its boundaries. The Church can only be an effective sign community in the world if it is an intrinsic symbol of Christ's redemptive presence.<sup>19</sup> It must itself be, in its internal affairs, what it symbolizes to the world. Otherwise it will be an empty, incredible sign, not a transforming symbol. It cannot constitute the explicitly Christian mediation of God's

<sup>19</sup>I believe the notion of an intrinsic symbol supports a functional analysis of the Christian community's mission in the world but avoids the danger of reducing the Church, a community of persons, to a pure means to some further end.

love for the world unless it is itself a concrete realization of this redemptive process. Concretely this means that the Church, like any other complex community, has to devote a good deal of its time and energy and material resources to its internal affairs if it is to have any hope of being an effective sign community in the world.<sup>20</sup> This is not a *carte blanche* for ignoring its mission *ad extra*, of course, nor an apology for maintaining the status quo. A radical revision of apostolic perspective and a considerable shift in apostolic priorities is called for, but no abandonment of the Church's traditional pastoral concern for its own membership.

Finally, highlighting the Church as an intrinsic sign of the world's *salvation* focuses attention on the crucial middle term relating the Church's pastoral care of its own members and its symbolic communication with the world outside its boundaries. The Church is a sign of the world's salvation insofar as it is the place where salvation happens in a peculiarly significant way, i.e., through explicitly Christian mediation which produces explicitly Christian confession that God offers salvation to all men in Christ. The Church is not the bastion of the already saved, the community of the brave and the strong and the free who no longer have need of salvation. It is the place where, in a highly visible way, salvation is actually taking place.<sup>21</sup> It is "the gathering of the ungifted" who experience the first fruits of a promised gift and therefore live in hope.<sup>22</sup> Only thus is it a useful sign to the world.

<sup>20</sup>Of course, a proper balance between mission and membership concerns is hard to achieve. Especially in time of crisis, institutional self-maintenance tends to become an overriding consideration. For some case studies of this process, cf. Donald Metz, *New Congregations: Security and Mission in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967).

<sup>21</sup>Karl Rahner's emphasis on the Church as *the place where salvation is happening* is one of the strong points of his vision of the Christian community. Salvation is a reality in the Church, but a reality in process toward a still outstanding fulfillment, manifesting itself as a healing power in the face of the Church's very real sinfulness. Cf. "The Church and the Parousia of Christ," *Theological Investigations VI* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969), pp. 295-312; "The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II," *ibid.*, pp. 270-94; and "Über das Ja zur konkreten Kirche," *Schriften zur Theologie IX* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1970), pp. 479-97.

Salvation, such a central concept in biblical and post-biblical Christian tradition, is a curiously neglected category in contemporary Catholic theology. Yet God's kingdom is a kingdom of salvation, and the signs of its inaugurated presence in the world are signs of salvation. The Christian gospel is essentially a gospel of salvation, a summons to both liberation and fulfillment, salvation *from* sin and salvation *in* union with God-in-Christ. I suspect a renewed understanding of salvation is one of the most important tasks facing Catholic theology today.<sup>23</sup> What is this "sin" from which Christ saves man? How can it be interpreted in a way that transcends a narrow moralism and individualism? What is this "human fulfillment" which Christ as savior brings to man and his human community? How can it be interpreted as both a present reality and the inaugurated pledge of a mysterious, largely unknown, eschatological fulfillment still to come? How does man today experience his need for salvation? In Tillich's categories of meaninglessness, culpability, and mortality, what does Christianity's "optimism of the second degree" promise in the way of a usable vision of human wholeness, a healing gift of pardon and peace, and a life that can be lived without denying that every man must one day pass through death?<sup>24</sup>

Whatever answers Christians give to these questions, they should know that their task as a sign community involves so incarnating those answers in their life and work together that their confession of what God is doing in their midst becomes a credible witness to his salvific presence in the larger world outside the boundaries of the explicit Christian community. In a world in need of salvation, they must

<sup>22</sup>Cf. John Meagher, *The Gathering of the Ungifted* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

<sup>23</sup>Gutierrez discusses this task in *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 149-87. For a survey of recent Catholic theological reflection, cf. the article on "Salvation," by Karl Rahner and others, in *Sacramentum Mundi V* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), pp. 405-38. J.-P. Jussua offers a new systematic approach in "L'enjeu de la recherche théologique actuelle sur le salut," *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 54 (1970), 24-45.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Robert Ochs, *The Death in Every Now* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1969), and John Dunne, *A Search for God in Time and Memory* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

constitute a community of saints indeed, but also of sinners on the way to salvation who have the gospel preached to them wherever they are along the way. For all men are called to the same salvation, and all men are merely on the way to that salvation. Stages on the way are important (for salvation is more than slipping by some final scrutiny), and the concrete mediations which help effect this human liberation and fulfillment are important (for salvation is not an abstract quality to be possessed but personal union with God to be realized through concrete events of symbolic communication). A Christian community composed only of a spiritual elite is not what is called for by its mission in the world.<sup>25</sup> Until the final fulfillment of God's kingdom, what the world needs is a credible sign of salvation happening, not the testimony of those who no longer have to struggle for salvation. Thus the Church as an intrinsic sign of the world's salvation can help the world only if, in its own internal affairs, it manages to combine pastoral concern for all its members—no matter where they stand along the way—and a challenging call to the fullest possible participation in the community's

<sup>25</sup>Segundo (*The Community Called Church*, pp. 89-91) maintains that the Church necessarily constitutes an aristocracy because of the peculiar responsibilities involved in the call to formal membership in the Christian sign community. All in the Church are called to full participation in the community's mission in the world and thus to genuine sanctity. And "if anything that places demands on people necessarily leaves the masses outside, then following Christ could not constitute an ideal for the multitude" (*ibid.*, p. 90). I agree with Segundo's vision of the Christian vocation but not with all his pastoral conclusions. Perhaps the Latin American pastoral situation demands a different emphasis, but surely the Christian community can somehow maintain its ideals without excluding those who are still on the way to realizing those ideals (or perhaps only beginning to commit themselves to those ideals). Yet Segundo seems to suggest the opposite: "If the obligations flowing from this sign-bearing function call for the purification of the Church's witness in one way or another—gently or roughly, by one's own decision or another's, by decree or by disinterestedness—then some people who bear the Christian name and who would like to continue in the community will find themselves excluded from it" (*ibid.*, p. 82). I would argue that, though only some may be called to formal membership in the Church, all men are called to genuine sanctity, and both members and non-members are still on the road to such sanctity. Exclusion from the community is hardly the best way of dealing with those whose apostolic zeal is deficient and so "purifying the church's witness."

mission of explicitly mediating Christ's presence in the world. Salvation is visible only where the need for salvation and the struggle to obtain it are also visible.

Pastorally, I think what is called for is both understanding and zeal. Catholicism has always had room in its ample bosom for less than perfect Christians. It has a tradition of special concern for "those with wars they barely win and souls they hardly save." Today that tradition is viewed with misgiving in some quarters. A number of psychological and cultural studies have called attention to the mixed motivation behind much religious behavior in contemporary America (including the religious behavior of Catholics still celebrating their emergence as a fully acculturated American church).<sup>26</sup> American Catholics (particularly the most zealous among them) display an unusually low tolerance for evidence of sinfulness in themselves or their co-religionists. They are discouraged and easily indignant when they

<sup>26</sup>Charles Glock and his associates, for instance, consistently emphasize the comfort function of religion in their studies of American religious behavior; cf. Charles Glock and Rodney Stark, *Religion and Society in Tension* (New York: Rand McNally, 1965). Bryan Wilson is one of the most influential (and most critical) comfort theorists; cf. his *Religion in Secular Society* (Baltimore: Penquin Books, 1969) and "Religion and the Churches in Contemporary America," *Religion in America* (W. McLoughlin & R. Bellah; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. 73-100. Gibson Winter has called attention to the churches' entanglement with American "familism" in *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches* (New York: Macmillan, 1962). In *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961) Peter Berger analyzes the non-religious factors operative in mainstream American Protestantism—an analysis he recently extended to American Catholicism in *A Rumor of Angels* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), pp. 12-14. Standard American surveys of the sociology of religion, though careful to avoid outright reductionism, also tend to emphasize the (often latent) non-religious functions of organized religion in America. Cf. N. J. Demerath and Philip Hammond, *Religion in Social Context* (New York: Random House, 1969); J. Milton Yinger, *The Scientific Study of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1970); and Elizabeth Nottingham, *Religion: A Sociological View* (New York: Random House, 1971). The perennial problem of defining religious behavior empirically and the extreme difficulty of measuring what sociologists call intrinsic or non-instrumental religion and its relative salience should, of course, be kept in mind in evaluating these sociological contributions. Nevertheless they do provide independent evidence for the mixed motivation that so complicates renewal efforts in American Catholicism.

hear the Church labeled a spiritual comfort station, a shopping center catering largely to the non-religious needs of its customers. The growing phenomena within American Catholicism of marginal allegiance and selective identification with the Church is especially disturbing for those whose vision of Christian commitment is an all-or-nothing proposition. In the face of "the suburban captivity of the churches," there is talk of drawing lines and enforcing membership standards, of pruning the vineyard and getting rid of the deadwood.<sup>27</sup>

With America's tradition of religious voluntarism, membership standards (and who determines them) constitute a perennial problem for all the American churches.<sup>28</sup> In a candid statement of a position which others only hint at, McBrien attempts to address the problem in terms of the Christian's special election to formal membership in the Church, an election which must not be identified with God's universal call to salvation:

If, in point of fact, one continues to insist that there is some advantage to belonging to the Church because it is the ordinary means of salvation for men, then we shall never overcome the menacing obstacle of moral stagnation and we shall never be out of earshot of the mournful moan of the Church's "uncertain trumpet." The many who remain in the Church even though they have not, in fact, been called to the community, would surely reassess their relationship to the Church once the impact of the Copernican Revolution had been felt. There is no advantage to being a member of the Church in terms of ultimate salvation. If the "Christian" cannot accept the Gospel in its explicit, verbalized form as proclaimed by the community itself, then this is a certain sign that the election has never been made in the first place or, if it has been made, the vocation was a temporary one and the time for departure is now. The Church, in other words, is entering a time when she must not only lose members but she must have the courage and the faith to promote actively their disaffiliation. The process will never

<sup>27</sup>Much depends on who is talking, of course: the Catholic far right in America would like to draw lines a bit differently than the community's professional theologians.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Franklin Littell, *The Church and the Body Politic* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), pp. 30-31, and James Gustafson, *The Church as Moral Decision-Maker* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970), pp. 126-37.

be complete within our history. The wheat and the chaff will continue to grow together. But the Church is not thereby exempt from the struggle.<sup>29</sup>

McBrien's pastoral stance in this passage is governed by his concern for the purity of the community's witness, not by any theoretical elitism. But I suspect an emphasis on the Church as the place where salvation is happening might point to another way of dealing with those responsible for the community's "moral stagnation." Furthermore, the theology of election and particularly of "temporary" election behind McBrien's pastoral position must somehow be related to the traditional Christian conviction that the community's proclamation mediates God's election and that in baptism God calls the baptized to membership in the Church once and for all, no matter how well or poorly the baptized cooperates with his vocation. Pastorally, the crucial question remains: what do the "disaffiliated" do next? Where do they obtain the historical tradition and community context which Christians have always insisted are so important for an incarnate human faith? I personally am convinced that the Church must remain a home for all the baptized, i.e., a place "where, when you go there, they have to take you in." I do not deny the complexity of the issue, but what concerns me in this paper is the potential pastoral rigorism that could result from American Catholic theology's new sign-community orientation. Consciousness that not all men are effectively called to formal membership in the Christian community and that salvation is possible outside its boundaries must not lead us to limit our pastoral concern to the liberated, fully committed members of the community. Such a policy, I am convinced, would ultimately only make it more difficult for the Church to be the credible, explicit presence of Christ's healing power in the world.

Without denying the evidence for compromise and mediocrity in American Catholicism, I personally would counsel challenge and concern rather than any more rigorous measures. Ironically, Catholicism's traditional rejection of elitism and rigorism has historically been accompanied by an impressive ability to generate

<sup>29</sup>*Do We Need the Church?*, p. 207.

internal reform and a consistent reluctance to redefine its ideals in the face of membership practice falling short of those ideals.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps we American Catholics have to learn to live more candidly with the inevitable gap between our Christian vision and our Christian practice, without compromising the vision or ceasing to criticize the practice. After all, where can the reality of Christian salvation be better manifested than in a sinful community acutely conscious of its need for salvation? Perhaps, too, our very mission as a sign community to the world demands that we first radicalize *our own* awareness of man's need for salvation and convince *ourselves* of the ultimate inadequacy of all human security and comfort that is not grounded in God's redemptive work in Christ. Then, perhaps, we may credibly groan in travail with the new creation now being born in the world and in us. In a world we now realize is one vast arena of God's coming kingdom, where all men are called to one salvation and all men, Christian and non-Christian, are only on the way to that salvation, we too must share in the world's tension between the salvation already dawning and the final fulfillment yet to come.

For it is in hope that we are saved, and as a sign of hope that we help mediate Christ's salvation to the world. To be a sign of hope the Church does not have to be the community of the already perfect and the already saved. It need only be a home for the needy where salvation is visibly taking place.

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<sup>30</sup>Cf. Andrew Greeley, *The Denominational Society*, pp. 233-34.