

## ECCLESIOLOGY FOR A PUBLIC CHURCH: THE UNITED STATES CONTEXT

In 1960, in his famous address to the Houston Ministerial Association, John F. Kennedy stated his understanding of the public implications of his Catholicism.

I am not the Catholic candidate for president; I am the Democratic Party's candidate for president, who happens also to be a Catholic. I do not speak for my church on public matters—and the church does not speak for me.<sup>1</sup>

Although understandable in the context of the polemics of that election, Kennedy's second sentence articulated an understanding of Catholicism, widely held at the time,<sup>2</sup> that separated its private and public dimensions. This privatistic view was about to be challenged by social, cultural, and ecclesial forces, including Kennedy's own presidency and the imminent Second Vatican Council.

For many Catholics of Kennedy's time the church provided an alternative and self-sustaining culture within the larger U.S. reality. It was optimistically assumed that these cultures would not come into conflict and, in fact, that in key areas of life they would reinforce each other.<sup>3</sup> Good Catholics were good Americans. Catholics looked to the church for guidance in their private lives but did not expect their church to play a distinctive role in shaping the nation's public policy. Many, if not most, 1950s Catholics found themselves comfortably Catholic and comfortably American. Studies such as Will Herberg's *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*<sup>4</sup> and the later work of sociologist Robert Bellah on civil religion<sup>5</sup> suggested that distinctive religious voices had been muted in the public forum in favor of a kind of generic civil religion which endorsed and celebrated American values. This view of the

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<sup>1</sup>John F. Kennedy, "Address to the Houston Ministerial Association, September 1960," in *Public Voices: Catholics in the American Context*, ed. Steven M. Avella and Elizabeth McKeown (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1999) 363.

<sup>2</sup>Though not by all, as movements and processes leading to such change were well in place by the time of Kennedy's speech. See Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1985) 417; Mark S. Massa, *Catholics and American Culture: Fulton Sheen, Dorothy Day, and the Notre Dame Football Team* (New York: Crossroad, 1999) 5-10; David J. O'Brien, *Public Catholicism* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1996) 195-229.

<sup>3</sup>The anticommunist struggle, for example. See O'Brien, *Public Catholicism*, 197.

<sup>4</sup>*Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1955).

<sup>5</sup>"Civil Religion in America," in *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury, 1975).

relationship of Catholic and American cultures as parallel and unconflictual, and of Catholicism as essentially a dimension of one's private life, was, however, only one strand in a long and complex history. Changes in United States culture,<sup>6</sup> the self-understanding of Catholics in the United States and in the ecclesiology of the postconciliar Catholic Church combined with significant social events to challenge this privatistic view and to call the church in the United States to a new way of thinking about its public role in U.S. society, which included addressing the common good of the whole, with a sometimes critical voice.

Late twentieth, early twenty-first century culture provides, in many respects, a new context and new issues for examining the public role of the United States church, but the conversation is by no means a new one. The relationship of the Roman Catholic Church to United States culture has a history that antedates mid-twentieth-century experience. How a church with a history of centralized authority and religious intolerance should relate to a religiously pluralistic and democratic society has been an issue from the beginning of its implantation in this culture. And further, the question of whether and how such a church should insert itself into debates over the common good in civic society, in other words, be a public church, has had different responses through United States history.

I am using public church here as broadly equivalent to "church" in the church/sect typology introduced to ecclesiology by Ernst Troeltsch. The public church is an ecclesial reality characterized by engagement with society. It is opposed to a sectarian understanding that focuses on the individual perfection of the members by withdrawal from society.<sup>7</sup> Martin Marty, who initiated the contemporary discussion, included among public churches those "churches which are especially sensitive to the *res publica*, the public order that surrounds and includes people of faith." Kenneth and Michael Himes add, in the present context, the notes of respect for the legitimate autonomy of other social institutions and cooperation with these institutions in working for the common good. I presuppose all this in my use of the term.<sup>8</sup>

The Catholic Church in the United States has, through its history, engaged with its social context in different styles. In the years since Vatican II, however, it has increasingly defined itself as a public church with a mission that extends beyond its boundaries and a contribution to make in civic debates about the common good. It has spoken publicly on numerous occasions on a wide range of issues of social

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<sup>6</sup>In this paper I am primarily referring to political culture. The United States is a country which is made up of the richness of many and diverse cultures.

<sup>7</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, vol. 2, trans. Olive Wyon (repr.: Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981; ET 1931; German original, 1911) 993.

<sup>8</sup>Martin E. Marty, *The Public Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 3. Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, OFM, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993) 2.

concern. Its agencies now extend beyond Catholic boundaries and provide social services, health care, and education on all levels to the wider U.S. community.

In light of this development, the question arises how inner ecclesial actions and structures contribute to, or undermine, the church's ability to be a credible public voice in this culture. In other words, how does the church's public role and message impact its inner life? Others have addressed the issue of the language of public theology, the specific content of the church's public statements, and the implications of the church's current understanding of its public role for church-state relations.<sup>9</sup> These will not be a major focus of this paper. I am concerned rather with the issue raised at the 1971 Synod, "Justice in the World." The Synod understands the mission of the church to encompass a public role of advocacy for justice in society. Corollary to this, it states:

While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes. Hence we must undertake an examination of the *modes of acting* and of the possessions and lifestyle found within the Church herself.<sup>10</sup>

Vatican II presented a renewed vision of the church as a public church with a liberating mission in the world, dynamically and prophetically in dialogue with culture, more collegial in governance, and more inclusive of all the baptized. But, as Edward Schillebeeckx points out, it reveals a serious weakness in leaving old structures, or modes of acting, largely untouched. "It . . . did not give this new image of the church any institutional and canonical protection."<sup>11</sup> A sacramental understanding of church would recognize that this Vatican II vision of the church must become incarnate in its visible structures and actions. It would also recognize that a church that speaks the *word* of justice to the world must strive to be a sacrament of justice in the world.

In order to carry out its public mission in U.S. society, ecclesial structures need to be developed and implemented to ensure that the church accords to its own members the human rights and human dignity it advocates in its address to the world. In today's world, the right of participation has become a symbol of the social recognition of human dignity and worth. The '71 Synod names explicitly as

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<sup>9</sup>For example, Himes and Himes, *Fullness of Faith*; David Hollenbach, Robin Lovin, John Coleman, J. Bryan Hehir, "Theology and Philosophy in Public: A Symposium on John Courtney Murray's Unfinished Agenda," *Theological Studies* 40 (1979): 700-15; John T. Pawlikowski, "The American Catholic Church as a Public Church," *New Theology Review* 1 (1988): 8-29; J. Bryan Hehir "Church-State and Church-World: The Ecclesiological Implications," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 41 (1986): 54-74.

<sup>10</sup>Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World* (Washington DC: USCC, 1972) 44; emphasis added. See also Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1983) 185-86.

<sup>11</sup>Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 207.

one of the justice issues the church must address within, "the right of everyone to be heard in a spirit of dialogue which preserves a legitimate diversity within the Church."<sup>12</sup> There is, therefore, a compelling need to implement appropriate processes for the consultation of the faithful so that the voices of all are included in determining the *consensus fidei* on important church issues. The church's public witness will be more credible and persuasive if it is clear that the diverse voices of all are included and valued within the church. This need for adaptation of church structure to encompass the democratic expectation of free speech and consultation has been a recurring theme through the history of the church in the United States. Matthew Carey, a trustee and prominent Philadelphia Catholic wrote in the eighteenth century:

A different order of things prevails in this country. The extreme freedom of our civil institutions has produced a corresponding independent spirit respecting our church affairs, to which sound sense will never fail to pay attention, and which it would be a manifest impropriety to despise or attempt to control by harsh or violent measures. The opinions and wishes of the people require to be consulted to a degree unknown in Europe.<sup>13</sup>

Jay Dolan suggests that the Catholic Church in the United States has struggled with this expectation from its beginnings. Would the church make an accommodation to American culture that would allow its voice to be heard in the public debates of the time? Or would it stand aloof from this culture, remaining a European church with the ultimate objective of bringing the culture under its control?<sup>14</sup> From the very beginning, the advocates of the first approach recognized that their vision of the church's public role would demand adaptation of church structures to respond to the distinctive ethos of this new national reality. There was a recognition that the church's external role vis-à-vis society would impact its inner life.

I will suggest in this paper that the church in the United States will be a more credible public voice on social and moral issues insofar as it works toward developing internal structures of participation and consultation that reflect the positive values of the participatory democracy that is its cultural context. This is warranted not only by the history and experience of the American church but also by the ecclesiological direction of Vatican Council II that envisioned a more participatory church and recognized the unique gifts and experiences of the local churches which, in communion with each other and with the bishop of Rome, make up the universal church.

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<sup>12</sup>*Justice in the World*, 45.

<sup>13</sup>Patrick Carey, *People, Priests and Prelates: Ecclesiastical Democracy and the Tensions of Trusteeship* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987) 156; as quoted in O'Brien, *Public Catholicism*, 24.

<sup>14</sup>Dolan, *American Catholic Experience*, 294-95.

I will first explore briefly the history of these issues in the United States. Secondly, I will consider the new ecclesial context created by the Second Vatican Council and the theologians of the council. And thirdly I will suggest some possible directions for furthering processes of consultation and collaboration within the church in the United States so that the church's public statements on the dignity and worth of every human being are more clearly reflected in its inner reality.

### I. A LOOK TO THE PAST<sup>15</sup>

David O'Brien, in *Public Catholicism*, a study of the history of the public role of the Roman Catholic Church in the U.S., identifies two major styles of relationship of the church to its culture with a third emerging in the latter part of the twentieth century. Each of these approaches has implications for the internal life of the church. Although each can be initially associated with a particular historical period, these styles can and have existed simultaneously. The first he terms "republican Catholicism," which is often epitomized by the ecclesiology of John Carroll and some of the so-called Americanist bishops; the second, "immigrant Catholicism,"<sup>16</sup> dating from the period of large-scale immigration in the nineteenth

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<sup>15</sup>The following section draws on a particular piece and period of American church history involved with the organization of the Catholic church in the United States. It draws primarily on the experience of Anglo-American and western European immigrants and provides a backdrop for the contemporary issues that are the focus of the paper. The reality of the American Catholic church, both earlier and through the periods under discussion, is much wider and includes the experience, oppression, and contributions of Native American, Black, and Latino/a Catholics, often omitted from prevalent historiography. The absence of these voices is another indication of the long history of the concern of this paper that the voices of all must be included if the church is to be a voice for justice. This omission is being redressed by a number of excellent recent studies. See, e.g., Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1990); Diana L. Hayes and Cyprian Davis, OSB, eds., *Taking Down Our Harps: Black Catholics in the United States* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1998); Jay P. Dolan and Gilberto M. Hinojosa, eds., *Mexican Americans and the Catholic Church, 1900-1965*, The Notre Dame History of Hispanic Catholics in the United States 1 (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994); Jay P. Dolan and Jaime R. Vidal, eds., *Puerto Rican and Cuban Catholics in the U.S., 1900-1965*, The Notre Dame History of Hispanic Catholics in the United States 2 (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994); Jay P. Dolan and Allan Figueroa Deck, SJ, eds., *Hispanic Catholic Culture in the U.S.*, The Notre Dame History of Hispanic Catholics in the United States 3 (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994); Orlando O. Espín and Miguel Díaz, eds., *From the Heart of Our People: Latino/a Explorations in Catholic Systematic Theology* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1999); Anne M. Butler, Michael E. Engh, SJ, and Thomas W. Spalding, CFX, eds. *The Frontiers and Catholic Identities* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1999); Dolan, *American Catholic Experience*, 15-68.

<sup>16</sup>Jay Dolan also uses the categories of Republican (1780-1820) and immigrant Catholicism (1820-1920), though he characterizes the third period somewhat differently.

century; and a third style, emerging in the early twentieth century, which he terms, "evangelical Catholicism."<sup>17</sup> Before examining some of the issues that engage us today as a public church, it is instructive to look, through the lens of O'Brien's first two typologies, to their antecedents in the past.

*Republican Catholicism.* O'Brien describes the republican period, rooted in the experience of Anglo-American Catholics, as grounded in the Enlightenment values of "religious freedom, separation of church and state and religious pluralism."<sup>18</sup> After the revolution, newly free to participate in the political life of the country, republican Catholics recognized that it was through demonstrating their adherence to these values as contributing citizens of the state that they would ensure continuing freedom to practice their religion. In public life, Catholics avoided alienating, sectarian language and entered civic debate on the basis of persuasion and rational discourse.<sup>19</sup> This approach was picked up later, in a new context, by John Courtney Murray.<sup>20</sup>

John Carroll, charged with the organization of the church within this new reality, recognized that adaptation from the prevalent monarchical, clerical style was called for. The need for adaptation to a new situation was, of course, not a new insight. The church had from the beginning adapted to changed social and cultural milieux, often borrowing governance styles from the current political regime.<sup>21</sup> James Hennesey points out that Carroll was "notable for theological breadth and for a deep sense of historical consciousness."<sup>22</sup> Looking to the needs of the church in this new republic, Carroll envisioned a national church, in communion with Rome. "Carroll wanted a church in communion with the Bishop and See of Rome, internally autonomous, self-perpetuating, and free of dependence on any foreign

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See *American Catholic Experience*, 101-24 and 127-57.

<sup>17</sup>O'Brien describes the evangelical style as a critique of both the republican and immigrant approaches, the former as too secular and the latter as too selfish. This approach, emerging after Vatican II, espouses the language of the gospel and the witness of Jesus in its critique of contemporary culture. *Public Catholicism*, 6-7.

<sup>18</sup>O'Brien, *Public Catholicism*, 9.

<sup>19</sup>O'Brien, *Public Catholicism*, 33.

<sup>20</sup>John Courtney Murray, SJ, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Kansas City MO: Sheed and Ward, 1960); See also Robert W. McElroy, *The Search for an American Public Theology: The Contribution of John Courtney Murray* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989). For the debate over the continuing adequacy of Murray's approach, see Hollenbach, Lovin, Coleman, Hehir, "Theology and Philosophy in Public: A Symposium on John Courtney Murray's Unfinished Agenda," 700-15. Hollenbach, Coleman, and Lovin suggest that it would be appropriate today to move beyond exclusive use of the language of philosophy to contribute the heritage of the Christian symbol system to public discourse in the United States. This intersects in some respects with O'Brien's "evangelical" style. Hehir continues to advocate an approach more closely connected to Murray's.

<sup>21</sup>Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 187-88.

<sup>22</sup>James Hennesey, "The Vision of John Carroll," *Thought* 54 (September 1979): 323.

jurisdiction."<sup>23</sup> He clearly wanted church order—he was after all responding to a situation of some anarchy—but he wanted an order different from the prevailing monarchical model. Hennesey points out that Carroll was in this respect very much an eighteenth-century Catholic. "His ecclesiology . . . antedated the romantic neo-ultramontanism which would exalt the papal role to new heights within a half-century of the old archbishop's death."<sup>24</sup>

Carroll had a high esteem for episcopal office but initially wanted bishops to be elected by a representative body of clergy, appointed neither by Rome nor by the civil government as was frequently the practice in Europe. He supported the system of elected lay trustees that gave laity a voice in significant parish decision making, though not in the selection of the pastor. The documents of lay trusteeism indicate that a feisty laity demanding voice in church affairs is not a new phenomenon of the post-Vatican II church. Carroll was also an early advocate of a vernacular liturgy.<sup>25</sup> Governance by constitutions was likewise a structure borrowed from the civil government. Carroll initiated his plan for ordering the church in the Whitmarsh Constitution for the organization of the clergy.<sup>26</sup> John England, another strong advocate of incorporating republican values into church organization,<sup>27</sup> developed a particularly interesting constitution in 1822 for his diocese of Charleston, SC. Reflecting the American value of participatory governance, he "held a [consultative] convention of his diocese every year with a house of clergy and an elected house of laity."<sup>28</sup> Both Carroll and England believed that church structures could and should be modified so that the reality of the church as the body of Christ could take root within a new reality.<sup>29</sup> They did not challenge the centrality of the offices of the papacy or episcopacy but suggested that they could be exercised differently to respond to new needs. Laity, too, in this new reality could take on a changed and more active role reflecting the participatory style of civic governance.

This early period of experimentation with some democratization of ecclesial structures was a brief one, and not without its struggles. The later John Carroll himself moved away from many of his earlier republican views to a more tradi-

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<sup>23</sup>Hennesey, "The Vision of John Carroll," 329.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 328.

<sup>25</sup>Dolan, *American Catholic Experience*, 113.

<sup>26</sup>Hennesey notes that this constitution "introduced at the very origins of the American Catholic church a strongly democratic clerical form of church government." "The Vision of John Carroll," 177.

<sup>27</sup>See Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*, 306.

<sup>28</sup>Gerald P. Fogarty, "The American Catholic Tradition of Dialogue," *America* (26 October 1996): 13. See also O'Brien, *Public Catholicism*, 25. Note the structural resemblance to the General Convention in the Episcopal Church. See David L. Holmes, *A Brief History of the Episcopal Church* (Valley Forge PA: Trinity Press International, 1993) 53-59.

<sup>29</sup>Dolan, *American Catholic Experience*, 306.

tional understanding of Catholicism.<sup>30</sup> Its themes, however, have remained a strong undercurrent in American church experience. They resurfaced at the time of the Americanist controversy and are emerging again today, fueled by the ecclesial vision of Vatican II and concerns of postmodernity. I rehearse this early history briefly and somewhat simplistically, not to endorse any particular structure but to point out that a church turned outward, a public church, will look for points of connection with its culture and society, as a condition for the possibility of remaining in dialogue with that culture. I point it out too to underline that today's discussions of the public role of the church and the consequent need for some adaptation to the culture have deep roots in the history of the American church.

This first phase of European-American<sup>31</sup> church history was brought to conclusion by a series of Plenary Councils ending with the Third Council of Baltimore in 1884, the last Plenary Council held in this country. The decrees of these councils, the first two initiated by the U.S. bishops, the last by Rome in response to U.S. requests, reflected the experience of the consolidation of a church and the new social and ecclesial realities precipitated by widespread immigration, but they also witnessed to a continuing recognition of collective regional episcopal authority despite the growing Roman emphasis on central papal authority.<sup>32</sup> In addition, John Tracy Ellis, in an analysis of the understanding of the episcopacy at the time of this council, says that in the face of some Roman initiatives during the period of conciliar preparation, "the bishops maintained a strong sense of the peculiar character and needs of their American mission."<sup>33</sup> The focus on episcopal authority and on the particular identity of the United States church, however, were accompanied by an increasing marginalization of the laity as a voice in church affairs.<sup>34</sup> The pastoral letter issued at the conclusion of the council endorsed an assimilationist approach to American civic society characteristic of an immigrant church anxious to disprove societal suspicion of divided loyalties.<sup>35</sup> The Baltimore councils, especially the third, thus reflect the interplay of republican and immigrant themes but also point to the transition from a republican to an immigrant style of public church.

*Immigrant Catholicism.* The immigrant church in O'Brien's typology was primarily a church turned inward. It was a church conscious of its minority status, in the first place concerned for the needs of its members in a foreign land,

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<sup>30</sup>Dolan, *American Catholic Experience*, 123-24. Dolan makes the interesting point that the episcopal Carroll moved away from the earlier more adventurous views of the presbyteral Carroll.

<sup>31</sup>I use European-American to reflect the reality that the voices of Black and Hispanic Catholics were not included in this process of church organization.

<sup>32</sup>James Hennesey, S.J., *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) 160.

<sup>33</sup>John Tracy Ellis, "Episcopal Vision in 1884 and Thereafter," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 4 (1985): 201.

<sup>34</sup>Dolan, *American Catholic Experience*, 180-81.

<sup>35</sup>Ellis, "Episcopal Vision in 1884 and Thereafter," 20.



composed of newly arrived immigrants still tied to the church of their land of origin. It was a church less concerned with having a voice in the public affairs of the country than with ensuring its own survival and the survival of its members. Where this church spoke publicly it was primarily for the benefit of its members, for example the labor movement and the school question. These internal concerns intersected with growing centralization in Rome to foster a church heavily dependent on the leadership of the educated clergy. The lay voices of early Anglo-American Catholicism were ever more muted. David O'Brien notes that this also reflected the backlash against liberalism in Europe and that in the United States "similar pressures were moving the church toward a degree of separation from the broader society and culture, the enhancement of hierarchical and clerical authority and more self-centered forms of organization."<sup>36</sup> Though not a sect in Troeltsch's typology, there was a sectarian impulse in the ecclesiology of this church which understood its mission primarily in terms of the next world and exalted world withdrawal as the most perfect way to live the Christian life. In O'Brien's immigrant typology church and society were separate but not necessarily in conflict. For the immigrant church the "problem was how to reconcile this emphasis on primary loyalty to the church with civic obligation in a pluralistic society."<sup>37</sup> This was resolved through the assimilationist approach that provided the primary way Catholics related to American society up to the time of the Kennedy presidency and Vatican II.

The republican and immigrant streams in American Catholic, ecclesial self-understanding coexisted uneasily through the nineteenth century until Roman intervention definitively quashed the so-called Americanists at the turn of the century. In *Testem Benevolentiae* (1899), Leo XIII rejected the idea that the American church could be "different from that which is in the rest of the world."<sup>38</sup> With this intervention the prevailing centralizing ecclesiology, solidified in the decrees of Vatican I, became the dominant ecclesiology of the American church. There was to be no "American" church with a more participatory style but rather a Roman church in the United States with a universalist ecclesiology that emphasized uniformity and conformity to church discipline. A church turned in on itself avoided addressing the larger social issues of the time for fear of divisions within its own members or with the wider society.<sup>39</sup> The prevailing sense of the visible, institutional nature of the church expressed itself concretely in the schools, hospitals, and parish complexes that served the Catholic community and seemed to witness to the permanence and stability of the Roman Catholic Church now firmly and somewhat comfortably planted in American soil. The collapse of this cultural narrative in the years following the 1960s leads some today to look back

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<sup>36</sup>O'Brien, *Public Catholicism*, 34.

<sup>37</sup>O'Brien, *Public Catholicism*, 61.

<sup>38</sup>Quoted in Dolan, *American Catholic Experience*, 315.

<sup>39</sup>For example, the church's reluctance to address the issue of slavery. See O'Brien, *Public Catholicism*, 64-70.

to that period with a kind of postmodern nostalgia as a high point of Catholic life in America.<sup>40</sup>

Efforts toward democratization, in effect, an early recognition of what we now refer to as inculturation, in the early period of U.S. church history failed because they found no warrant in the prevailing ecclesiology of the nineteenth century. Such efforts to adapt to a pluralistic society founded on religious freedom could only seem foreign and dangerous to a church accustomed to relate to society either by domination or as persecuted minority. Without the historical consciousness of a John Carroll, who recognized that the church in fact had changed and adapted through history, there appeared to be no justification for the kind of internal change that seemed to be called for if the church was to relate to society in this new style.

In the post-Vatican II American church, calls for recognition of the distinctiveness of the American political experience and a certain democratization of structures are once again being raised from a number of directions.<sup>41</sup> They are precisely being raised within the consciousness of the church as a public church whose mission extends beyond its boundaries. It is widely recognized that the ecclesiology of Vatican II has created a new situation in which such calls can find resonance and support as they did not in the nineteenth century.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, in his introduction to *Lumen Gentium* in the Abbott edition of the Vatican II documents, Avery Dulles notes that "in many respects the Constitution strikes a 'democratic' note."<sup>43</sup> The context of late modernity, or postmodernity,<sup>44</sup> makes it more critical than ever that the church look within itself at the "democratic" issues of authority, pluralism,

<sup>40</sup>See, e.g., Charles R. Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most Powerful Church* (New York: Times Books, 1997) 255-81; Massa, *Catholics and American Culture*, 231.

<sup>41</sup>See, e.g., *A Democratic Catholic Church: The Reconstruction of Roman Catholicism*, ed. Eugene C. Bianchi and Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Crossroad, 1992); Leonard Swidler, *Toward a Catholic Constitution* (New York: Crossroad, 1996); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ecclesiology of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993); Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Yolanda Tarango, *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

<sup>42</sup>See, e.g., Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come* (New York: Seabury, 1974); "Structural Change in the Church of the Future," *Concern for the Church: Theological Investigations XX* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 187-228.

<sup>43</sup>Walter M. Abbott, ed., Joseph Gallagher, trans. ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Crossroad, 1966) 12. All Vatican II citations are to this edition.

<sup>44</sup>Such issues as radical distrust of authority, recognition of irreducible plurality and diversity in all aspects of life, and ambiguity about the nature of truth are often identified as distinguishing characteristics of a postmodern consciousness. See Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); Tracy, *On Naming the Present* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1994).

representation and human rights if it is to be able to address them in society with a credible and persuasive voice.

## II. VATICAN II

This section will examine four central themes of Vatican II ecclesiology that speak directly to the issues the church in the United States must face if it is to be a persuasive public voice in U.S. society for the twenty-first century. In its turn to the world, Vatican II recognizes the public role of the church. The retrieval of a local church ecclesiology acknowledges the distinctive cultural gifts that each local church contributes to the universal church. Conciliar teaching on collegiality and the laity offer directions for a more inclusive and collaborative church.

Although, in this period of conciliar reception, there is dispute over the interpretation of the council, and I recognize the ambiguity and compromising nature of many conciliar texts, I am following the thinking of conciliar theologians such as Rahner and Schillebeeckx who clearly understood the council as intending to set the church in a new direction, a direction away from its most recent past, but one clearly in continuity with the long tradition of the church.<sup>45</sup> I understand the following themes in that hermeneutical context.

a. *Church and World*. At Vatican II the Catholic Church made a definitive option to be a public church. After the long period of ecclesiocentrism that culminated at Vatican I, the church turned its face resolutely to the world. In the powerful rhetoric of *Gaudium et Spes*, the church made its own "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the men [*sic*] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted . . ." (GS 1). *Gaudium et Spes* goes on to say that the church intends to take on these concerns "by engaging with it [the human family] *in conversation* [my emphasis] about these various problems" (GS 3). Schillebeeckx suggests that this is the most lasting and significant change of the council. World withdrawal is no longer an option. "No salvation outside the world."<sup>46</sup> The church's mission, as articulated by Pope John XXIII just before his death, extends beyond the confines of the Catholic Church. "Today more than ever, certainly more than in previous centuries, we are called to serve man [*sic*] as such, and not merely Catholics; to defend above all and everywhere the rights of the human person, and not merely those of the Catholic Church."<sup>47</sup>

The church's present understanding of its relationship to the world represents a development beyond Vatican II. In reaction to the previous period of world rejection, Vatican II adopted an approach to the world that now seems overly

<sup>45</sup>Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 194-95. Rahner, "Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council," *Concern for the Church. Theological Investigations XX*, 77-89.

<sup>46</sup>Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 5.

<sup>47</sup>Peter Hebblethwaite, *John XXIII: Pope of the Council* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984) 498-99; quoted in Daniel Donovan, *The Church as Idea and Fact* (Wilmington DE: Michael Glazier, 1988) 30.

optimistic. Since the Council, there has been increasing recognition of the negativities in a world where cultures of uncritical materialism and technological advancement create and support conditions of oppression and injustice in other cultures. Since the council the official church has offered an often critical stream of social justice teaching based on its commitment to human rights and to the dignity of each human person as *imago dei*. Pope John Paul II has been the symbolic center of this in his world travels, in his encyclicals and other papal writings and most recently in his apologies for the church's past failures to be a voice for justice. The church in the United States has also moved away from the assimilationist posture characteristic of the immigrant experience. The acceptance of Catholics into the mainstream of American society coincided with the dramatic social struggles over the Vietnam War, civil rights, and abortion.<sup>48</sup> In the years following these painful debates it is no longer assumed that Catholic and national understandings of the common good will coincide. U.S. Catholic leadership has, in a number of instances, taken a stance on social issues in opposition to national leadership and values. In adopting this more critical voice, however, it is important that the church not forget the Vatican II recognition that the church can also learn from the world and from those immersed in the world. The conversation with the world initiated at the council is two-way.

The church's increasing post-Vatican II practice of offering to the world the insights of its social teaching on justice and human rights, its commitment to be a public church with a critical voice, raises the central question of this paper. Do the church's internal structures clearly manifest the same concern for human rights and dignity that the church requires in its engagement with the world? Ironically, the prophetic voice of the Bishop of Rome is often heard more compellingly by those outside the Roman Church for whom he exercises a kind of moral persuasion, than by those within the church over whom he exercises juridical authority.

b. *Local Church*. A second relevant Vatican II theme is its retrieval of the concept of the local church to balance the dominant universalist ecclesiology. I will use the term *local church* to refer both to the individual diocese, what the council most often calls the particular church, and to the gathering together of the churches of a particular geographical or cultural region.<sup>49</sup> *Lumen Gentium* acknowledges that "in and from [the] individual churches there comes into being the one and only Catholic Church" (LG 23). Vatican II also recognized the distinctive geographical and cultural reality of these individual churches when it supported their collective gathering in bishop's conferences. *Christus Dominus*, the document on bishops, recognized episcopal conferences as organs uniquely suited to deal with the need to adapt to the circumstances of diverse social and cultural realities.

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<sup>48</sup>O'Brien, *Public Catholicism*, 236.

<sup>49</sup>For an extended discussion of both the terminology and the problematic of local/universal church, see Joseph A. Komonchak, "The Local Church and the Church Catholic: the Contemporary Theological Problematic," *The Jurist* 52 (1992): 416-47.

An episcopal conference is a kind of council in which the bishops of a given nation or territory jointly exercise their pastoral office by way of promoting that greater good which the church offers mankind [*sic*], especially through forms and programs of the apostolate which are fittingly adapted to the circumstances of the age. (CD, 38)

Vatican II's local church ecclesiology, rooted in church tradition, offers theological grounds for understanding the catholic, or universal church as coming to be authentically out of the diverse experience and reality of the local churches (LG, 23).<sup>50</sup> This implication of the council is recognized in the increasing acceptance of the concept of inculturation in the years following the council.<sup>51</sup>

It is also taken up in Karl Rahner's conviction that a critical shift in ecclesial self-understanding, only the second major shift in the church's history, was inaugurated at the council, the period of what he termed the "world-church."<sup>52</sup> Rahner's "world church" demands an ecclesiology that begins with and emphasizes the local church. He saw the church emerging, although timidly, from its long period of Europeanization toward recognizing its reality as a communion of local churches, each of which has its own unique cultural reality. "A world-church as it exists outside Europe cannot simply import and imitate the lifestyle, law, liturgy, and theology of the European church. In all these respects the churches outside Europe must be really independent and culturally firmly rooted in their own countries."<sup>53</sup> Although Rahner mentions explicitly the need to honor the particularity of the churches of Africa, Asia and Latin America, his analysis would also support the recognition that the U.S. church is likewise a distinctive ecclesial reality whose structures could appropriately reflect the positive values of its democratic

<sup>50</sup>See Joseph A. Komonchak, "The Local Realization of the Church," in *The Reception of Vatican II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo, Jean-Pierre Jossua, and Joseph A. Komonchak (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1987) 77-90.

<sup>51</sup>See Peter Schineller, SJ, *A Handbook on Inculturation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990). Schineller cites Pedro Arrupe's definition of inculturation as "the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through the elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs, and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about 'a new creation' " (6). See also Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1985). Aylward Shorter, in *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, defines inculturation as a "creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures." (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1988) 11. For John Paul II's understanding of inculturation, see *Redemptoris Missio*, *Origins* 20 (31 January 1991): 541ff.

<sup>52</sup>Rahner, "Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council," *Concern for the Church: Theological Investigations XX* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 83.

<sup>53</sup>Rahner, "The Future of the Church and the Church of the Future," *Concern for the Church: Theological Investigations XX*, 110-11.

experience. Rahner expressly connects his urgency for the world church to the church's newly reawakened consciousness of its public role. "Although it is only with great difficulty and terribly slowly that European churchgoers are becoming aware of the church's world-responsibility, this responsibility . . . can no longer be excluded from the consciousness of a world-Church."<sup>54</sup>

In his understanding of the catholicity of the church as emerging from the communion of the diverse local churches, Rahner recognizes the importance of the unifying role of the Petrine ministry, but he says that its exercise must be contextualized by the "principle of the collegial constitution of the Church." "A world-Church," he says, "simply cannot be ruled by that Roman centralism which was usual in the time of Pius XII."<sup>55</sup> This is recognized in the council's balancing of the papalism of the dominant universalist church model with a retrieval of the importance of the bishop who pastors the local church by his proper authority and not as a vicar of the Pope (LG 27).

Vatican II offered a vision of the local church as essentially, albeit sometimes critically, in dialogue with the culture in which it is rooted. This vision gives theological ground to the insight of early republican Catholics that the church in the United States should not be a mere transplant of the European church but legitimately grow out of and reflect the positive values of its new cultural context, among which were participatory and collaborative styles of governance.<sup>56</sup>

c. *Collegiality*. This brings me to my third Vatican II theme, collegiality. Carefully nuanced to avoid apparent conflict with the papal office, the council's understanding of collegiality nevertheless seemed to open the door to a more participatory and inclusive model of church governance. The council describes its understanding of collegiality as grounded in "the very ancient practice by which bishops appointed the world over were linked with one another and with the Bishop of Rome by the bonds of unity, charity and peace; [and] also, in the conciliar assemblies which made common judgments about more profound matters in decisions reflecting the views of many" (LG 22). In its postconciliar reception, however, collegiality became a broader symbol of a new understanding of the church for many Catholics, a kind of creeping collegiality. It awakened the hope of a more participatory style of decision making in many dimensions of church life that is today not just the expectation of American society, but reflects worldwide democratic aspirations. The council's emphasis on collegiality encouraged the development of synodal and conciliar structures at every level of church life and seemed

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<sup>54</sup>Rahner, "Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council," *Concern for the Church: Theological Investigations XX*: 81.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>56</sup>This does not imply that the church should be uncritically adaptationist. See William Portier, "Inculturation as Transformation: The Case of Americanism Revisited," *Catholic Historian* 11 (1993): 107-24.

to herald a more collaborative way of being church. This seemed to be an area where appropriate structures *were* set in place to realize the vision of the council.

d. *Laity*.<sup>57</sup> The fourth Vatican II theme foundational to this paper is its discussion of the role of the laity. From the beginning of the American church there has been concern that not only episcopal voices be heard but that American Catholic lay persons, accustomed to voice and vigorous debate in public life, also have voice in their church. Vatican II's emphasis on understanding the church as community<sup>58</sup> reflects a shift away from the previous tendency to identify the church exclusively with the hierarchy. *Lumen Gentium* balances a Christomonistic "descending" ecclesiology, which gives rise to a hierarchical understanding of the church, with a pneumatological/charismatic understanding that recognizes the gifts of the spirit to be present in the whole body of the faithful (LG 4). This recognition is epitomized by the dynamic, historical image of the church as the people, the whole community of the faithful. The church as a whole is the spirit-filled community. What entered most vividly into the popular imagination immediately following the council was an image of the church newly focused on an active role for the laity.<sup>59</sup>

The primary, explicit understanding of the role of the laity at Vatican II corresponds to its self-recognition as a public church, a church whose mission encompasses concern for both the spiritual and material welfare of all human beings. The laity are understood to be the presence of the church in the world. Called to their mission by baptism, "laity seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God" (LG 31). Precisely opposed to the understanding reflected in Kennedy's speech, the laity are now expected to be the voice of the church in public affairs.

This typology, however, soon became inadequate in postconciliar church life.<sup>60</sup> Although the republican church of John Carroll might have understood the church's public presence primarily in the civic involvements of its lay leaders, the post-Vatican II public church in the U.S., reflecting its new situation in U.S. society, speaks out often on public issues through official ordained spokespersons. Lay persons, on the other hand, taking seriously the affirmation of their baptismal call to mission and ministry, became involved not only in making the church

<sup>57</sup>The term *laity* itself has become problematic in its stress on distinctions within the church and its past implication of a second class status within the church.

<sup>58</sup>See Daniel Donovan, *The Church as Idea and Fact*, 52-53.

<sup>59</sup>See the discussion of charismata and participation in Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1998) 222-33.

<sup>60</sup>See Joseph Komonchak's analysis of the development beyond this typology in "Clergy, Laity, and the Church's Mission in the World," *Official Ministry in a New Age* (Washington DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1981) 168-93. See also Donovan, *The Church as Idea and Fact*, 53-54.

present in public life, but in the inner life and ministry of the church. It became clear that those expected to be the church's public voice also expected to have voice in inner church matters. This right of the laity to contribute to growth in the church's ecclesial self-understanding is also grounded in the theology of Vatican II. It is explicitly recognized in the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*. "From the reception of these charisms or gifts . . . there arise for each believer the right and duty to use them in the Church and in the world for the good of mankind [*sic*] and for the upbuilding of the Church. In so doing believers need to enjoy the freedom of the Holy Spirit who 'breathes where he wills' (Jn. 3:8)" (AA 3).<sup>61</sup> The text goes on to say that believers must exercise this right in communion with the rest of the body, including its pastors. The pastors in turn are counseled "not to extinguish the Spirit but to test all things and hold fast to what is good" (AA 3).<sup>62</sup>

In a strongly inclusive statement, Vatican II recognizes that the "body of faithful, as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy One . . . cannot err in matters of belief. Thanks to a supernatural sense of the faith which characterizes the People as a whole, it manifests this unerring quality when, from the bishops down to the last member of the laity, it shows universal agreement in matters of faith and morals (LG 12)." This text certainly implies that the voices of all the faithful should be included in determining the *consensus fidelium*.<sup>63</sup>

Vatican II's inclusive understanding of the *sensus fidei* makes clear that the right of the laity to be heard in the affairs of the church is not, in the first instance, grounded in the American democratic experience but in the very nature of the church itself as spirit-filled community. As Edward Schillebeeckx points out, according to the New Testament witness, there should be no dichotomy between the church understood as mystery "from above" and the church as the people, "from below" since, in the spirit-filled community, what comes from below comes from above. "The New Testament . . . does not know the later contrast between what comes 'from below' and what comes 'from above' . . . what arises spontaneously from the community of Jesus is at the same time experienced as a gift of the

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<sup>61</sup>This right of the laity was not included in the 1983 revision of Canon Law.

<sup>62</sup>This exhortation also appears in LG 12. See the 1990 document of CTSA members, "Do Not Extinguish the Spirit," forwarded to the U.S. and Canadian bishops. This document expresses concern that the promise of Vatican II is not being fulfilled in a number of areas and the hope that the church will not turn away from the task of renewal initiated at the council.

<sup>63</sup>For a discussion of the understanding of the term *sensus fidei* at Vatican II and its implications for the church, see John Burkhard, "*Sensus Fidei*: Meaning, Role and Future of a Teaching of Vatican II," *Louvain Studies* 17 (1992): 18-34. See also Francis A. Sullivan, SJ, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983) 17-23 and 187-88. Obviously this is not a new idea. See John Henry Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, edited and with an introduction by John Coulson (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961).



Spirit."<sup>64</sup> In the same vein, Giuseppe Alberigo points out the "ineradicable and qualitative difference between the church and civil society in that the *sensus fidelium* is rooted in the faith and is strengthened by the inspiration of the Spirit."<sup>65</sup>

Vatican II announced its commitment to be a public church with a mission in the world. It moved away from the primarily hierarchical/monarchical model of the church to offer directions toward an ecclesiology for a public church that could speak credibly to today's world about human rights and human dignity. Central to this new image of the church is its understanding of the importance of the local church, collegiality, and the role of the laity. These directions resonate with themes that have recurred throughout the history of the American church and in many ways respond today to worldwide longings. In each of these areas, however, in this period of conciliar reception, there has been some retreat from the expectations and hopes of early interpreters of the council. The recognition of the role and function of the bishop as head of the local church and of episcopal conferences as expressing the national identity of regional churches has been challenged recently by a pattern of Roman intervention in the life and discipline of the local and regional churches.<sup>66</sup> There has been increasing Roman control over the agenda, participation, and decisions of synods<sup>67</sup> and a reluctance to grant decision-making power to such conciliar structures at any level. And there has not as yet been developed any permanent, effective, and inclusive way to ensure the consultation of all believers in determining the sense of faith of the church. This reality of the church, almost forty years after the council, underlines Schillebeeckx's concern that for the council's vision to become a reality it must be incarnated in visible structures.

### III. DIRECTIONS TOWARD AN ECCLESIOLOGY FOR A PUBLIC CHURCH

The previous sections of the paper have suggested that a desire for a certain democratization of church structures to make them more participative and collaborative has been a continuing concern within the American church. This desire has recently been connected to the church's growing self-understanding as a public church, a church whose mission encompasses advocacy for just structures in civic society. The ecclesiology of Vatican II offers theological legitimization for

<sup>64</sup>Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry* (New York: Crossroad, 1985) 74-75.

<sup>65</sup>Alberigo, "Ecclesiology and Democracy: Convergences and Divergences," in *The Tabu of Democracy within the Church. Concilium*, ed. James Provost and Knut Walf (London: SCM Press, 1992) 19.

<sup>66</sup>For example, in the issue of inclusive language in the translation of the Catechism, in the ICEL translation of the Psalms, and in the insistence on juridical norms for the implementation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* in the U.S.

<sup>67</sup>For example, the Asian synod and the Synod for the Americas.

such a development. Postconciliar theologies of inculturation<sup>68</sup> reinforce the conviction that an experience of church completely foreign to one's social and cultural experience will remain heteronomous. This is not to suggest that the church become a political democracy or that the U.S. practice of democracy is in any way normative or ideal. It is to suggest that a church struggling within to be a community that incorporates the voices of all in decisions that affect them, where authority is exercised by persuasion rather than decree, and where diversity of perspective is welcomed rather than perceived as a threat, will be a more forceful voice for justice than a church that excuses itself from such struggles.

It is widely recognized that the distinctive American contribution to the Council was the church's acceptance of religious liberty, thanks to the work of John Courtney Murray. This was clearly a development in doctrine<sup>69</sup> that emerged, at least to some extent, out of the American experience of adapting to a religiously pluralistic society. The notion of religious freedom was once looked upon with suspicion rivaling the official church's concerns about some of today's issues.<sup>70</sup>

American Catholics with their expectation of participative democracy and free speech once again have the opportunity to contribute a gift to the universal church. Underneath many individual issues of ecclesial concern lies the widely noted and pressing need to find appropriate, inclusive, and structured processes to include the voices of the laity in determining the *sensus fidelium* on important social and ecclesial issues. The church's witness as a public church will be far more credible, particularly in a democratic society, if it is clear that the voices of all have contributed to developing this *consensus fidelium*. A recommitment to this admittedly difficult task by bishops, theologians, and all involved in the pastoral mission of the church in the United States could help realize the Vatican II vision of a more participative and collaborative church as well as reflect the American expectation, voiced early by Matthew Carey, that in this culture the diverse voices of the people demand to be heard.<sup>71</sup>

The American church has, in fact, made a significant start on this quest. In the two years prior to the United States bicentennial celebration the bishops of the United States committed themselves to a broad consultative process called "Liberty and Justice for All," which culminated in the 1976 "Call to Action" conference held in Detroit. The Call to Action conference addressed, in the U.S. context, the church's explicit recognition at the '71 Synod that "action on behalf of justice is a constitutive element of the church's mission." Its agenda was the agenda of a

<sup>68</sup>See n. 47 above.

<sup>69</sup>See Gene Burns, *The Frontiers of Catholicism: The Politics of Ideology in a Liberal World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) 55-56.

<sup>70</sup>Pius IX, *Syllabus of Errors*, an appendix to the encyclical *Quanta Cura* (1864).

<sup>71</sup>This is, of course, not unique to the United States. Giuseppe Alberigo points out that "Christians are in the presence of a characteristic 'sign of the time,' constituted by the request for participation and coresponsibility which characterizes the majority of contemporary cultures." "Ecclesiology and Democracy: Convergences and Divergences," 21.

public church. Its hope was to make a contribution to the common good in the United States by dealing with societal issues such as race and ethnicity, nationhood, work, militarism, and poverty from the perspective of gospel values and the church's social teaching. In his opening address Cardinal Dearden heralded the conference as inaugurating "a new way of doing the work of the Church in America."<sup>72</sup>

Following the typology of Vatican II, Call to Action saw the primary bearers of this witness in U.S. society as the laity, who were included in large numbers in the consultation. The intention was to develop out of this process a five-year pastoral plan for the social mission of the church in the United States. Following the conference, in his initial report to the NCCB, Cardinal Dearden characterized the assembly as "our first attempt to convene such an assembly of the American Catholic community . . . , working in unison, we bishops were able to bring together what must surely rank as one of the more diversified deliberative assemblies in our history."<sup>73</sup> Dearden went on to acknowledge that, as a first attempt, this conference was a sometimes untidy learning experience on all sides, but he encouraged his brother bishops not to give up on the consultation process initiated at Call to Action. "The process of consultation has given new hope to many who had grown skeptical of sharing responsibility in their Church. It has allowed many persons and groups long excluded from having an *effective* voice to be heard at last."<sup>74</sup> One of the things that the American church experienced at Call to Action was the reality of diversity and plurality within its own ranks. Dearden responded to this by saying "in framing our response we should affirm the freedom and diversity within the Church which was revealed at Detroit. We should build structures of Church life which serve and strengthen local parish communities and support Christian movements which enrich community life."<sup>75</sup> The initial pastoral response of the NCCB to the Call to Action recommendations in May of 1977 affirmed a continuing commitment to a consultative process. "We reaffirm our commitment to the principle of shared responsibility in the contemporary church, and we assert our intention to improve consultation with our people in the future."<sup>76</sup> This intention was most notably carried out in the broad consultative processes resulting in the pastorals on peace (1983) and the economy (1986).<sup>77</sup> The more consultative spirit continued in some respects for a period following Call to Action,

<sup>72</sup>Quoted in George Higgins, "Beyond Religious Freedom: Church in Society," *Origins* 6 (9 December 1976): 404.

<sup>73</sup>[http://www.cta.usa.org/whobishconference/A\\_reporttoNCCB.html](http://www.cta.usa.org/whobishconference/A_reporttoNCCB.html).

<sup>74</sup>[http://www.cta.usa.org/whobishconference/A\\_reporttoNCCB.html](http://www.cta.usa.org/whobishconference/A_reporttoNCCB.html).

<sup>75</sup>[http://www.cta.usa.org/whobishconference/A\\_reporttoNCCB.html](http://www.cta.usa.org/whobishconference/A_reporttoNCCB.html).

<sup>76</sup>"A Call to Action: Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops," *Origins* 6 (19 May 1977): 759.

<sup>77</sup>"The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response," (Washington DC: USCC, 1983); "Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the US Economy" (Washington DC: USCC, 1986).

and such initiatives as the pastoral on racism, "Brothers and Sisters to Us,"<sup>78</sup> and the adoption of an affirmative action plan for the Bishops' Conference<sup>79</sup> grew out of Call to Action recommendations.

But the promise of Call to Action has not been fulfilled and, in fact, the Bishops' Conference gradually distanced itself from Call to Action and its recommendations. Many today have, in fact, forgotten that the original Call to Action was an episcopal initiative. The pastoral plan adopted by the Bishops' Conference in May of 1978 already reflects this detachment. The committee assigned to draw up the plan wrote that, though they would take into account what they had heard during the consultation, "in reviewing our charge, members agreed that our assignment does not entail the implementation of the resolutions of the Call to Action conference itself."<sup>80</sup> The pastoral plan itself, which focused on five areas of social concern, never entered strongly into the American Catholic consciousness as a motivating force, and the remembrance of Call to Action as heralding "a new way of doing the church's work in America" gradually faded from memory.

This distancing seems to have been precipitated precisely by the recognition of delegates that the church's posture as a public voice in U.S. culture had implications for its inner life. In relationship to the recommendations of Call to Action for church advocacy of justice in society, the delegates developed recommendations for justice in the church that "assure that the church apply to its internal life its teachings on social justice and human rights."<sup>81</sup> Issues were raised such as the selection of bishops and pastors, annulment processes, financial aid for professional training for ministry, church teaching on homosexuality, the need for a national review board, roles for women in the church, to name but a few. More broadly, there was a call for "further development of both structures and practices of consultation and shared responsibility at every level of the church."<sup>82</sup> Cardinal Dearden had noted that "in beginning this process we took the chance that we would hear things we might not want to hear, be asked to do things we cannot do."<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless he counseled the bishops to "keep faith with the thousands that have participated in this program . . . [and] open our hearts and minds to their proposals and to the future."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>"Brothers and Sisters to Us" (Washington DC: USCC, 1979).

<sup>79</sup>See "Affirmative Action Plan for National Bishop's Conference," *Origins* 9 (30 August 1979): 161.

<sup>80</sup>"Progress Report of the Call to Action Committee," *Origins* 7 (29 September 1977): 230.

<sup>81</sup>"A Call to Action: The Justice Conference Resolutions on the Church," *Origins* 6 (4 November 1976): 309.

<sup>82</sup>"The Justice Conference Resolutions on the Church," *Origins* 6 (4 November 1976): 309-13.

<sup>83</sup><[http://www.cta.usa.org/whobishconference/A\\_reporttoNCCB.html](http://www.cta.usa.org/whobishconference/A_reporttoNCCB.html)>.

<sup>84</sup><[http://www.cta.usa.org/whobishconference/A\\_reporttoNCCB.html](http://www.cta.usa.org/whobishconference/A_reporttoNCCB.html)>.

As the Bishops' Conference distanced itself, particularly from some of the church reform proposals, Call to Action reinvented itself first as a local, Chicago-based grassroots organization and then as a national movement continuing to call for and make the connection between societal and ecclesial reform. Although some bishops remain supportive of the present Call to Action, its chapters in other dioceses are discouraged from meeting on church property. In one diocese threats of excommunication have been levied against Call to Action members.<sup>85</sup> A process begun in hope for a more collaborative church has now become an increasing situation of polarization.

The U.S. church is at a critical juncture. There is still the opportunity to make a recommitment to this consultative process but there is danger of an increasing disjunction between grassroots groups or popular movements and the official church, to the detriment of both. In its inclusive understanding of the whole church as spirit-filled community Vatican II overcame, in principle, the distinction between the teaching church as composed exclusively of the hierarchy and the learning church as composed of a passive and receptive laity. All in the church are both teachers and learners and all have a contribution to make to the understanding of the faith and mission of the church.<sup>86</sup>

I suggest two directions in particular which the American church might explore to continue and further the process of dialogue and learning called for at Vatican II and inaugurated in the U.S. at Call to Action. One might be considered "from below" and the other "from above."

1. *Listening to Popular Movements.* A number of post-Vatican II ecclesologies suggest that lasting church renewal will come from the base, whether the basic Christian communities of Latin America, intentional communities of Europe and North America, parishes, religious communities, or grassroots movements like the present Call to Action, to mention just a few examples.<sup>87</sup> Cutting off dialogue with such groups and movements, even when they express viewpoints that seem challenging to present church teaching, goes counter to the freedom of the Gospel and to the spirit of Vatican II. As a pastoral council relying on the character of its content to elicit assent, rather than on the imposition of external authoritative demands or anathemas, Vatican II raised the hope for a new and more dialogical way of acting on the part of church authority.<sup>88</sup> In an article written during the

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<sup>85</sup>The diocese of Lincoln, Nebraska.

<sup>86</sup>See Ladislav Šrámek, *The Church: Learning and Teaching* (Wilmington DE: Michael Glazier, 1987); Leonardo Boff, "Ecclesia Docens versus Ecclesia Discens," in *Church: Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1985).

<sup>87</sup>See Rosemary Ruether, "Spirituality and Justice: Popular Church Movements in the United States," in *A Democratic Catholic Church: The Reconstruction of Roman Catholicism*, 189-206.

<sup>88</sup>See Rahner, "Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council," *Concern for the Church: Theological Investigations XX*, 89

council, Cardinal Ratzinger stated forcefully, "the Church needs the spirit of freedom and of sincere forthrightness because she is bound by the command, 'Do not stifle the Spirit' (1 Thess. 5:19), which is valid for all time."<sup>89</sup> He goes on, "might she [the church] not be rebuked for trusting too little that power of truth which lives and triumphs in the faith, for entrenching herself behind exterior safeguards instead of relying on the truth, which is inherent in liberty and shuns such defenses?"<sup>90</sup>

Such a commitment to dialogue would have to recognize the possibility that truth is not confined to the hierarchy of the church but can also emerge out of the lived experience of the community of the baptized in its particular cultural context. Schillebeeckx points out that authentic development in church teaching and practice has often originated out of what was once considered "illegal practice" at the base.<sup>91</sup> Orlando Espín has pointed out the importance of listening for the values and insights imbedded in what is often called "popular religion" as an important source for the *sensus fidei* of the church.<sup>92</sup> Giuseppe Alberigo, talking about the creative role of the faithful in ecclesiology, says that it is "the profession lived out in faith by some of the faithful, their orthopraxis which constitutes the 'concrete catechism.'"<sup>93</sup> And Mary Ann Hinsdale has suggested that the voices of the marginalized, whether the poor, women, or new immigrants, for example, may well be an expression of the Spirit calling the church to a new self-understanding.<sup>94</sup> A Vatican II understanding of the bishops as leaders of the local churches calls on them to listen carefully to the voices of the people in order to bring the uniqueness and gifts of their cultural realities to the unity in diversity of the universal church. This in no way ignores the fact that the creative and diverse insights of the people need to be tested in a critical dialogue with scripture and church tradition that involves not only bishops but theologians as well. It was precisely this kind of dialogue that the organizers of Call to Action envisioned.

In parishes, Catholic agencies, religious communities and grassroots movements, thus, there already exist resources, structures and opportunity to get in touch with the sense of faith of the people. It is critical that the church (including theo-

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<sup>89</sup>Josef Ratzinger, "Free Expression and Obedience in the Church," in *The Church: Readings in Theology* (New York: P. J. Kenedy and Sons, 1963) 214.

<sup>90</sup>Ratzinger, "Free Expression and Obedience in the Church," 215.

<sup>91</sup>Schillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face*, 254-58.

<sup>92</sup>See Orlando Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1997); "Tradition and Popular Religion: An Understanding of the *Sensus Fidelium*," in *Frontiers of Hispanic Theology in the United States*, ed. Allan Figueroa Deck, SJ (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1992) 62-87. See also Rahner, "Theology and Popular Religion," *Theological Investigations XXII*, 140-47.

<sup>93</sup>Alberigo, "Ecclesiology and Democracy: Convergences and Divergences," 18.

<sup>94</sup>Mary Ann Hinsdale, IHM, "Power and Participation in the Church: Voices from the Margins," Warren Lecture Series in Catholic Studies no. 13, the University of Tulsa (28 October 1990).

logians) not lose the opportunity to learn from the wisdom of the people by withdrawing from dialogue with such groups. A second more formal structure that the U.S. church could consider is the Plenary Council.

2. *The Plenary Council.*<sup>95</sup> The holding of a plenary council to deliberate on issues of importance to the American church would provide an opportunity for a more formal, "from above," method of consulting the voices of many. The *Commentary on the Code of Canon Law* sees the purpose of such councils as offering "a significant opportunity to read the signs of the times, respect the conditions of local culture, and present the Church in that part of the world as a true light to all peoples there."<sup>96</sup> There have been few such councils in recent times, and none in the United States since the Third Council of Baltimore in 1884. Vatican II urged the renewal of the custom of holding such councils as part of its fostering of a collegial spirit in the church (CD, 36). The symbolic and practical importance of the Councils of Baltimore in the establishment of the church in the United States would make the revival of this conciliar tradition particularly appropriate as the church enters a new millennium and a new moment in its history in the United States.

In a significant modification from the 1917 Code, the new Code opens participation to include nonordained religious and lay persons (even women!) and thus gives voice, though not vote, to a much wider variety of voices in a legislative assembly of the church. In another change, the Conference of Bishops now has the authority to convene and preside over such councils. The plenary Council thus offers a significant opportunity for the local church to express its distinctive ecclesial reality in communion with the other local churches that make up the universal church. The open nature of such a consultative process would be a powerful symbol of a church struggling to be just and inclusive within as it preaches this message to society. A Council would surely be a significant expression of a public church. Imagine the media attention to such an event!<sup>97</sup>

These suggestions are merely meant to be evocative of the need to provide more inclusive and structured practices of consultation if the church is to be perceived as just within when it speaks publicly on issues of justice. I do not mean to imply that there is no consultation going on in the U.S. church. There are parishes and dioceses that have extensive and ongoing dialogical structures. But these processes need to be more universal and inclusive and there needs to be more recognition of the creative role of all the baptized in coming to new understandings of the *sensus fidelium*.

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<sup>95</sup>See *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary*, ed. James A. Coriden, Thomas J. Green, and Donald E. Heintschel (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), cc. 439-46.

<sup>96</sup>James H. Provost "Particular Councils," in *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary*, 362.

<sup>97</sup>Provost, *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary*, 362.

## CONCLUSION

This brings us back to the fundamental issue of this paper. The church in the United States increasingly has defined itself as a public church with a message of human rights and human dignity for the world, a message based on its understanding of the human person as *imago dei*. The right of participation is symbolic of this fundamental human dignity and is so understood in the church's recent social teaching.<sup>98</sup> The American bishops recognize participation as a fundamental principle of justice and human dignity in the pastoral letter on economics. "Justice demands that social institutions be ordered in such a way that guarantees all persons the ability to participate actively. . . . The level of participation may legitimately be greater for some persons than for others, but there is a basic level of access that must be available for all. Such participation is an essential expression of the social nature of human beings and of their communitarian vocation."<sup>99</sup>

This paper has thus focused on the need to apply this insight within the church by further developing structures to ensure more inclusive participation in coming to an understanding of the church's faith for our time. The local church in the United States, with its particular history and experience, has a unique opportunity and challenge to contribute to the building up of the whole church by recommitting itself to the collaborative and participatory internal processes that will enable it to be a credible and forceful voice for justice in the many critical social and moral issues that face U.S. society at the dawn of a new millennium. Perhaps the best public witness the church can offer to a postmodern world confronted with the danger of increasing fragmentation is that of modeling a true unity or catholicity that emerges out of celebrating and including the diverse voices of all.

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<sup>98</sup>Himes and Himes, *Fullness of Faith*, 38-42. See, e.g., John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), 44; *Centesimus annus* (1991), 46.

<sup>99</sup>"Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the US Economy," 77-78.