

The Church: the Evolution of Catholicism

Richard P. McBrien, Harper One Publisher, 2008, 496 pp., \$17.99

Summarized by Dan Brent

The book is a course in ecclesiology – the study of the Church. Literally, a course. Professor McBrien suggests that the book is structured to use as a textbook in such a course. And it has a bibliography for additional study, a glossary of theological terms for reference, and seventy pages of (small print) footnotes.

But, for the most part, it is easy to read. And in many ways fascinating and encouraging for anyone who hurts with the contemporary problems of the Church, its divisions, its reluctance to embrace some flexibility in addressing pressing issues, its bureaucratic shackles, its fear of admitting faults.

The author starts by defining ecclesiology – “the *theological* (his italics) study of the Church, which is to say that it studies the Church as mystery and sacrament.” (p.1) The mission of the Church is in the areas of word, sacrament, witness, and service. He notes that in an astonishingly short period (the fifty years since the election of John XXIII) we have moved “from a highly clericalist, pyramidal, authoritarian, and unecumenical concept of Church to one that emphasizes the radical equality of all the baptized, the common ground that the Catholic Church shares with other Christian Churches and ecclesial communities, the world’s non-Christian religions, and the human community as a whole.” (p.20)

In a chapter entitled “Ecclesiology in the New Testament”, McBrien explains the multiple meanings of the word “ecclesia” as it appears in Acts and the Pauline letters. Sometimes it is the local community, sometimes the collection of communities celebrating Jesus. Offices in the groups were variously named as prophets, teachers, overseers, presbyters, elders, etc. All emerged for the purpose of giving service. Women played prominent roles. The charisms given by the Spirit in that era set the directions rather than any hierarchical leadership. In fact, “the Johannine communities showed little interest in church offices.” (p.58) But eventually, when Jesus didn’t come as soon as everyone expected, the Church began to adopt the organizational grid of the Roman Empire.

In the “post-biblical” period of the Church Fathers, bishops emerged as leaders and heresies were beaten back. Augustine (d.430) saw the unity of the Church in the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Eucharist, and the Bishop of Rome. “The correlation between Peter and the Bishop of Rome, however, did not become fully explicit until the pontificate of Leo I in the mid-fifth century.” (p.99)

Gregory (d.1085) gets credit for promoting “canon law” and for freeing the papacy from secular domination. But quarrels with Rome led first to the East-West Schism (1054) when the Orthodox Churches broke from the papacy and then the Protestant Reformation (16th century). After the schism of 1054, the Roman pope began to see himself as a sort of

CEO of all the dioceses. “It was as if he were the bishop of every local church and the local bishops were simply his vicars or delegates.” (p.99)

The concept of papal infallibility emerged during the fourteenth century and, in 1870, Pius IX and Vatican I proclaimed papal infallibility as a dogma. In that era, the study of the Church tended to be scholastic, legalistic, and hierarchical, rather than biblical and pastoral. Pius XII began to shift that emphasis with his encyclical *Mystici Corporis* (1943). It saw the Church as “both hierarchical *and* charismatic.” (p.122) Hierarchical for sure! The encyclical said, “Those who exercise sacred power in this Body [clergy] are its chief members” while parents “occupy an honorable if only a lowly place in the Christian community.” (p.124) Wow!

In the years before the Second Vatican Council, new theologians were suggesting ideas that would have made their elders nervous. Conscience rather than official Church teaching was seen as the ultimate norm for morality. Respect for religious freedom gained momentum against the “outside the Church there is no salvation” and “error has no rights” assumptions. Interest was building for liturgical reform including a change to use of the vernacular rather than Latin for the mass and sacraments.

The Council bishops supported these reforms. Although Paul VI forced many compromises on the Council fathers to accommodate the conservative curia cardinals, in the end the renewal called for by Pope John XXIII prevailed. Included was recognition that the local bishops shepherd their dioceses by their own authority and not as delegates of the pope.

But mostly the Council was pastoral in tone and spirit. In *Lumen gentium*, the document on the Church, the fathers described the Church as mystery, sacrament, and community – an enormous shift from the hierarchical descriptions of former generations. By reason of their baptism, the document explains, “the laity share in the threefold office of Christ: of teaching, ruling, and sanctifying.” (p.166) Also, “Rather than a single Church with the pope as its earthly head, the Church universal is a communion of local churches, each of which is the Body of Christ in that place.” (p.172)

The council also spoke of “degrees of communion”, opening up the possibility of dialogue with the separated Christian communities. “It remains true;” the fathers said, “that all who have been justified by faith in baptism are incorporated into Christ and therefore have a right to be called Christians, and with good reason are accepted as sisters and brothers in the Lord by the children of the Catholic Church.” (p.175)

McBrien gives brief summaries of the thinking on Church after Vatican II by theologians like Rahner, Kung, Dulles, Moltmann, and Metz. He has a section on female theologians – a relatively new phenomenon.

A substantial segment of the book is given to the role of Church in the political realm. “The Church must have an active role in society. But the Church offers only a framework of values or a moral vision.” (p.259) “Liberation theology is a form of political theology

that takes as its central theme the freeing of the poor and the powerless from economic, social, and political exploitation and oppression.” (p.267)

McBrien offers Ladislav Orsy’s analysis that the agenda for future Church development includes reform of the Roman Curia, reform of the appointment and role of bishops, giving more leadership to Episcopal conferences, and clarifying the pope’s teaching role. On this latter point, McBrien takes some time to discuss “reception” which he defines as “a process by which the body of the faithful, or a significant portion thereof, accepts and abides by an official teaching or disciplinary decree of the hierarchical Church.” (p.322) He offers as a major example of this dimension being lacking the birth control teaching of the *Humanae vitae* encyclical of 1968. Non-reception “indicates that previous teachings or decisions had been invalid from the beginning.” (p.324)

The book finishes with the author’s guesses about the future for the Church. He sees an effort to relate Christianity to the other great religions of the world, more ecumenical Eucharistic sharing, a less monarchical papacy, more inclusion of women even in ordained roles, and more initiative toward social justice.