



Avery Dulles' MODELS OF THE CHURCH Summary

- Church as **Institution**: Clerics (Pope, bishops, priests, deacons) responsible to the laity for *teaching* (professing approved doctrines), *sanctifying* (Administering legitimate sacraments), and *ruling* (governing faith and morals).
- Church as **Community** (Body of Christ): A worshiping community of believers who by their faith become a sign and instrument of the union of God and man.
- Church as **Sacrament**: The church is understood as the visible manifestation of the grace of Christ in the human community.
- Church as **Herald**: A faithful people who “hear the word of God and keep it” by putting their faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior and proclaiming the Christ-event in their lives.
- Church as **Servant**: A redeemed people who have the mandate to establish in this world Christ’s kingship of peace, justice, love and reconciliation.
- Church as **School of Discipleship**: The process of learning (disciple means learner) the “job description” of the Church.

Avery Dulles' MODELS OF THE CHURCH A Bit of Detail



- Church as **Institution**. The Church is seen as “the perfect society” (Bellarmine), as a political society alongside any other government. This is the “Roman” side of Roman Catholicism, the structure of which was designed after the brilliance of the *hierarchical* (vs. representative or democratic) administration of the Roman Empire, whose virtues were *efficiency and accountability*. The Church is seen as on the giving (vs. receiving) end of the three functions of *teaching, sanctifying and governing*. This model is susceptible to *clericalism* (assuming that the administrators are somehow better than those they minister to, leading to passivity in the members), *juridicism* (that laws and penalties are the chief forms of activity vs. forming brother or sisterhood or doing the actions of love) and *triumphalism* (dramatizing the martial conquest of Satan). The main focus of this model is within, toward those already in the institution vs. those outside. The Scriptural foundation for this model is Matthew 16:18: “You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church.” The advantages of this model are a strong endorsement by official Church documents in the past few centuries, continuity with the past and a strong sense of corporate identity. Its liabilities are the relatively few Scriptural affirmations of structure, a de-emphasis of the charismatic and prophetic roles of the Church, the diminishment of critical and exploratory theology, the exclusion of non-Catholic Christian Churches and a monopolism out of sync with our pluralistic age.
- Church as **Community**. This model stresses the personal and the interpersonal, the fellowship of persons with God and with each other. It stems from the “house church” structure of the first decades of Christianity, wherein the associations were face-to-face, the organization fluid, relations were covenantal (vs. contractual), the numbers small (30 to 40) and the participants intimate. The Scriptural precedent is strong: the Church is the “*Body of Christ*” (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12). As a body, the structure is vital, organic, growing. The Church is called the “*People of God*” (1 Peter 2:9) which opens its identity to the world. The disadvantages of this model are an

obscuring of the cooperation between the spiritual and the visible dimensions of the Church, the danger of divinizing the Church beyond its due, the lack of clarity regarding the Church's identity and mission and the possibility of reducing the Church to a social impulse. The Church as a whole cannot reverse history and deny its institutional place there and in the present age.

- Church as **Sacrament**. Just as Christ is the *Sacrament (the visible form of an invisible grace)* of God, so the Church is the Sacrament of Christ. The seven Sacraments flow from this identity. This designation sets the mission of the Church clearly as one of holiness: to be a sign of God's grace in a world needful of redemption. This model challenges the Church to be more like Christ in its dealings with everyone. Since the Eucharist is the central Sacrament of the seven, the Church takes on the challenge of being the prayerful, liturgical presence in the world while at the same time calling the world to "*table fellowship*," that is, to the conditions of cooperation, friendship and exchange which are characteristic of those who dine together. Scriptural basis for this model is 1 Peter 2:9: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." Paul, in writing about marriage as a Sacrament (Greek: *mysterion*) of the relation between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:32), implies that the Church is also sacramental. This model brings out the *symbolic quality* of human life itself, that we are not yet what we are called to be while at the same time not discouraged from seeking what we not yet are. In short, the Church is called to be saintly while clearly not yet "all there". Still, Sacraments are *efficacious*, that is, they produce what they signify. So the Church is holy, not by dint of its own merits, but by the grace of God, which sanctifies the Church in Christ. The advantage of this model is its ability to serve as job description for the Church, along which lines its performance can be evaluated. A disadvantage is that the job description might not clearly identify the outward or apostolic mission of the Church.
- Church as **Herald**. It gives prominence to a *theology of Word*: That Jesus, as the Word of God (John 1), preaches the word (gospel as "good news") of the Kingdom (Mark 1:15) and commissions his disciples to spread that word and Word (message and Person) to all people (Matthew 28; Acts 2). The "job description" of the Church as Herald is clear: to *evangelize*, that is, to receive the good news and to pass it on. As in the previous model, the "in between" nature of this model is key: it is not arrogant to claim the Word as truth if at the same time I stand in need of hearing it as I speak it. Evangelizers stay true to their task if they are themselves evangelized. *Language has an assembling function*: shared meaning constitutes us into human communities. This language can separate us, as at Babel, or unify us, when we enculturate it (apply a central message to a local context). Words are also proleptic, in that they can claim for us an identity we do not yet fully possess, as when the intern calls him or herself a doctor yet is

still in the “practice” of appropriating medical skill. A danger of this model is that words can become formulaic (lose their context and be reduced to magic or meaningless formulae). Another disadvantage is that one might limit Revelation to the Bible and forget that the **Tradition** (a faithful handing on of essential truths) which established Scripture is another source of revealed truth. A third caution is that this model might neglect action as the way to fulfill the word.

- Church as **Servant**. This model works to correct the sinful disparity (which exists among humans, not in God) between word and action. Humans can lie, or fail to keep promises. Christian commitment to serve others fulfills the commandment to love (John 13:34). This model sets the church in a subordinate role to the world, just as Jesus washed his disciples’ feet and commissioned them to do likewise (John 13). This model has inspired Church sponsored institutions of charity (hospitals, soup kitchen, sanctuaries, prison chaplaincies) as well as prophetic voices which speak out against societal injustice (pacifism, human rights advocacy, political lobbying, etc.) A danger of this model is that one may be tempted to think subordination means obedience to the world, whereas the Church serves the world by obeying God. It is easy to get co-opted by political movements and worldly values like consumerism. Another danger is *secularism* itself, which values human action but ignores the spiritual basis for Christian service. Actually, a spiritual foundation for service can prevent burnout, the discouragement that results when intractable social problems do not seem affected by one’s efforts to help. It is only roads that lead someplace that get maintained; Cul-de-sacs rarely get repaired.
- Church as **School of Discipleship**. Avery Dulles added this model after the first edition of his book to incorporate the process of learning (disciple means learner) into the “job description” of Church. Indeed, becoming organized, communal, holy, evangelical and serving all involve the Church in a process of education which not only *informs* a person, but *forms* him and her, and *transforms* as well. Indeed to look at Church structures in any age is to see institutions of learning, from the Orders of Catechumens and Penitents in the early Church to general education schools today. Jesus spent all of his public life gathering and educating disciples. The sensitivity of the Church to different conditions of the learner has led to distinction, not only between *pedagogy* (children’s education) and *andragogy* (adult education), but among stages of *evangelization* (the process of receiving and spreading the good news). Dangers in this model arise from *failing to recognize* appropriate conditions of the learner:
 - **Pre-evangelization**, which is addressing the conditions of openness to the gospel (food, shelter, spiritual and political peace). This is where the servant model is prominent. This openness may lead to:

- **Conversion** of heart. *Convertere* means to turn, and it is one's will, one's heart, one's intention that turns first. From this time, a person is considered a member of the Church, even before one receives the Sacraments. One is in the *Order of Catechumens*. It takes a while for habit and understanding to follow, which necessitates a period of:
- **Catechesis**, that is, a further instruction (from Greek: *cat-echo*, meaning rehearse or repeat). In the early Church, adults would take two or three years to study and pray the gospels and apply it to their lives. Today, children receive instruction as they learn other subjects. The danger today is that this instruction is empty without the conversion experience that should precede it.
- **Scrutiny and Exorcism**. These spiritual processes were the initial rationale for Lent, the period of forty days before Easter, the feast of Christ's resurrection. The scrutinies were examinations of conscience for the believers to deepen their faith; the exorcisms were prayers for the disciples for strength against evil.
- Celebrations of **Baptism, Confirmation** and reception of **Eucharist** (sacred bread and wine) during the Easter vigil. The disciple is thus fully initiated.
- **Mystagogia**, the ongoing learning of mysteries. All the faithful are in this stage, since there is always more to learn about God's ways.