



People of God: Four Models of Church

Reflection

One favorite contemporary image of the Church, employed by both Vatican Council II and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, is St. Paul's image of the Church as the new people of God. Based on the Jewish idea of Israel as the people of God, Paul sees the Christian community as the people of God of the New Covenant, profoundly linked with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, rooted in the Old Testament. The term "people of God" also appears consistently in official Church documents.¹

The Church as people of God can be viewed from many vantage points. In this reflection, we select four models that provide understanding as well as challenge: the Church as sacrament, herald, servant, and community of disciples. (Other models will be explored in future ParishLife.com topics.)

1. The Church as Sacrament

The concept of sacrament has to do with the presence of the spiritual in material creatures and the communication of the spiritual through the material. The Church is the sacrament, that is, the sign and instrument of the intimate union between God and God's people. It is also the sign and instrument of the fundamental unity of all humankind which flows from the union between God and people.

The image of Church as sacrament was given special emphasis in Vatican Council II. This notion was hailed by those who study the Church (ecclesiologists) as *the* achievement of the Council concerning a definition of the Church:

The statement of the Second Vatican Council with regard to the total sacramentality of the Church is probably the most important pronouncement it made concerning the Church....All the Council's other statements about the Church are affected by this insight. The key to the new understanding of the Church reached by the Council is the teaching of the Christocentric character of the Church.²

2. The Church as Herald

The model of Church as herald emphasizes the responsibility of the Church to communicate the Good News of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

It is taken for granted that vowed religious and clergy are obligated to herald the Good News of Christ. What is expected of the laity? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (904–5) responds by quoting St. Thomas Aquinas and the Second Vatican Council:

"To teach in order to lead others to faith is the task of every preacher and of each believer."³

Lay people also fulfill their prophetic mission by evangelization, "that is, the proclamation of Christ by word and the testimony of life." For lay people, "this evangelization...acquires a specific property and peculiar efficacy because it is accomplished in the ordinary circumstances of the world."⁴ "This witness of life, however, is not the sole element in the apostolate; the true apostle is on the lookout for occasions of announcing Christ by word...."⁵

3. The Church as Servant

The servant model follows from the Church's mission in the service of God's reign, working toward a more caring, just, and peaceful world. Further, the reign of God demands the transformation of human reality; the Church must be an agent of this transformation. Our goal is to imitate Jesus, who even though he is called King and Lord, chose to come as a servant. All of his actions were colored by his desire to give his life in service. By doing so, he has redefined the word "reign" and given us a model for serving the poor and suffering. So we are also called to serve the poor alongside Christ, who chose to identify himself with the poor (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 786).

4. The Church as Community of Disciples

The invitation to follow Jesus is an invitation into community. The Church is a community gathered around the person of Jesus Christ, where we are nourished, challenged, healed, in other words, made ready to be sent on mission in today's world. The early Christians realized the importance of community, as evidenced in the Acts of the Apostles (2:42–47).

There is ample evidence from Scripture that Church is a community of disciples—the words *disciple* and *companionship* occur over 250 times in the New Testament.

Small Christian communities have greatly furthered the experience of the Church as a community of disciples. They have “enabled believers to develop a more profound union with God and one another. They have also been a means for renewing and expanding the Church. They offer greater hope than ever that Christians will deepen their love for God, for one another, and for all of creation...”⁶

¹ *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen gentium)*, 9; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 753; *Revised Code of Canon Law*, Can. 204, 1.

² Michael Schmaus, *The Church as Sacrament* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975), p. 5.

³ Reprinted from *The Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas*, III, 71 ad 3–3. Copyright 1948, 1981 by Christian Classics, 200 E. Bethany Dr., Allen TX 75002.

⁴ *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen gentium)*, 35.

⁵ *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (Apostolicam actuositatem)*, 6; see *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (Ad gentes)*, 15.

⁶ Excerpt from *Small Christian Communities: A Vision of Hope for the 21st Century, Revised and Updated* by Thomas A. Kleissler, Margo A. LeBert, and Mary C. McGuinness. Copyright © 1997 by RENEW International. Used by permission of Paulist Press. www.paulistpress.com, p. 7.