

From the Introduction to
Stephen Bevens, SVD

COMMUNITY OF MISSIONARY DISCIPLES:
The Continuing Creation of the Church
(A Work in Progress)

“The pilgrim Church is missionary by its very nature” (AG 2)

“Evangelizing ... is the grace and vocation proper to the church, its deepest identity”
(EN 14)

“The Church which goes forth is a community of missionary disciples” (EG 24)

A Working Definition

It might be important, already here in the Introduction, to offer what I call a “working definition” of the church, a definition that I will unpack as I unpack the three statements from Vatican II, EN and EG above. Of course, the church cannot ever be adequately defined. It is, as Vatican II has taught, a Mystery—a reality that Christians come to know as they participate in the church’s life, and one that defies precise definition. Nevertheless, I think I can offer a working definition that will help readers navigate these pages, and that will serve as a kind of touchstone for what follows. My working definition, then, is this:

The church is God’s Pilgrim People, called and gathered together by the Spirit in all its diversity, in faith in the Risen Christ, in order to embody, demonstrate, and proclaim the Reign (“Kin-dom”) of God, which it believes was inaugurated in and through Jesus, whose mission it shares and continues both within the church and within the world, and celebrates in and is nourished by Word and Sacrament for its missionary life.¹

¹ This definition has grown in length and precision over the years, especially thanks to my students in the Philippines, Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Australia, and the students and participants from all over the world in both the Hesburgh Program for Continuing Ministry and the Institute of Religious Formation at Catholic Theological Union. Of note is the order of the three aspects of Jesus’ and the church’s mission—beginning first with embodiment or witness, then embodied service or demonstration, and only then verbal preaching or proclamation. Originally I used the terms “witness to, serve, and preach,” but I think “embody, demonstrate, and proclaim” express the reality of the church’s mission in a more graphically and more accessibly. In a similar way, the liturgical and celebratory nature of the church was first pointed out by these perceptive students. I am deeply grateful for their important

Each phrase of this “working definition” is significant. First of all, the church is a *People—God’s People*. It is not first of all a hierarchy, but a community. It is an *ordered People*, but one rooted in the fundamental “great dignity” (EG 104) of baptism and the lavish distribution of gifts that the Spirit bestows. It is that Spirit that *gathers* the church. The church is not a “voluntary society” in the sense that that the personal choice that people make comes from their own initiative. Being a member of the church is rather a personal response to divine grace, to divine initiative and invitation. Such “election,” of course is not for privilege, as LesslieNewbiggin points out, but for mission and service.²

The church is a *Pilgrim People*. As the subtitle of this book emphasizes, the church is never finished, never fully created by the gathering Spirit. It is the *pilgrim* church that is “missionary by its very nature” (AG 2). As Pope Francis writes, while the church “is a *mystery* rooted in the Trinity,” it “exists concretely in history as a people of pilgrims and evangelizers, transcending institutional expression, however necessary” (EG 111). As the church journeys through history and meets new ideas and realities that emerge along the way, it changes, grows, and its message and structure does as well. It is always “on the move” (TTL 55-79), a “Verb,” as Godfrey Rust explains it in the poem at the beginning of this book.

Such an invitation is to *faith in the Risen Christ*. To be a member of the church is to have committed oneself to the Servant Lordship of Christ,³ risen from the dead and living now in the midst of his disciples. Although all peoples “are called to be part of this catholic unity of the People of God” (LG 13), not all people of good will are therefore members of the church. What makes a person a member of the church is a person’s adherence to faith—in its intellectual, affective, and behavioral dimensions⁴--to Jesus the Christ. This does not mean, of course, that God’s Spirit and the Risen Lord are not present and active outside the boundaries of the church, offering all women and men the possibility of salvation through participation in the paschal mystery (GS 22). As Vatican II reminds us, membership in the church is not assurance of salvation, although, as I shall argue in this book, it offers, at least objectively, the best *means* (community, tradition, sacraments) of attaining to salvation’s fullness (see LG 14). Nevertheless,

reactions and observations. Like the church itself, this definition will probably grow and change as it continues to be shaped by women and men who dialogue with it.

²LesslieNewbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 80-88.

³“Lordship” is, like “kingdom” or “reign,” on which I will reflect below a difficult word in today’s world where any kind of hegemony, hierarchy, and patriarchy is, with reason, suspicious. I use it here—and in other places in this work—with the modifier “Servant,” recognizing nevertheless the word’s inadequacy and even danger. The word aims, I believe, at expressing a deep relationship in love to Christ, conscious of the paradox expressed by theologian Karl Rahner that, with God, the *more* we give ourselves over in relationship the more we experience selfhood, identity, and true freedom. See Karl Rahner, “On the Theology of the Incarnation,” *Theological Investigations* IV, trans. Kevin Smith (Baltimore: Helicon Press), 117.

⁴ See Stephen Bevans, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 29-31.

as St. Augustine put it well over a millennium ago, there are some in the church who have that God does not have, and there are some that God has that are not in the church at all.⁵

The point of the church, then, is not about—at least not in the first place—attaining salvation or avoiding eternal punishment. Rather, it exists *in order to embody, demonstrate, and proclaim the Reign(or Kin-dom) of God*, to work with God in the transformation of the world and the completion of God’s creation. It is precisely *in this self-giving* that one finds the fullness of life—“salvation” (see EG 10). The church exists, in other words, as a community of missionary disciples, “missionary by its very nature” (AG 2). The church’s existence as church depends on its life of wordless, authentic witness (embodiment); self-effacing, self-sacrificing service (demonstration); and clear, confident, and yet humble proclamation of the gospel *about and of* Jesus of Nazareth.

The order here is significant. The church must first of all embody in its members the joy, healing, and integrity in which membership in the Christian community results; it must express this in real service to humankind and to all creation; and, when opportune and “whenever God opens a door of speech” (AG 13) the church must proclaim both humbly and boldly the person and the gospel to which it has been entrusted. Mission, in other words, is done in “prophetic dialogue.”⁶

This mission of embodying, demonstrating, and proclaiming is not, however, about the church itself. The church “is not of ultimate importance.”⁷ The church exists *in order to* witness to, serve, and proclaim the *kingdom, reign, realm, or kin-dom* of God. The term “kingdom,” although apparently preferred by John Fuellenbach in his magisterial work,⁸ has the disadvantage of being an androcentric term on the one hand, and as many scholars point out, a more territorial reference than the more dynamic “reign” of God. This reality is already and yet not fully inaugurated in the world, and the church is a sacrament of this already present and yet not fully inaugurated reality. It is not so much a *place*, although a wholly worldly reality, and so the traditional word “Kingdom” is not an adequate translation of the original Greek word *Basilea*. What Jesus embodies, demonstrates, and proclaims is a *life-giving and life-sustaining relationship*, and so better described by the translation “Reign.” However, even this word has connotations of hegemony that is present in the original *basilea* or even its Hebrew equivalent *malkuth*. Others offer translations like “commonweal” or “commonwealth,” but neither of these is a direct translation.⁹

⁵ Augustine’s words are: “many who seem to be without are in reality within, yet many who seem within yet really are without.” See *On Baptism: Against the Donatists*, Book V, Chapter 27, paragraph 38, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/14085.htm>.

⁶ See Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 348-52; the reference to “humbly and boldly” is to David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991) 489.

⁷ Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 7.

⁸ John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God: The Message of Jesus for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

⁹ See Neil Darragh’s discussion of the limits of “commonwealth” in *But What is the Church For?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2021), 29-30.

Perhaps even more suggestive of its meaning—although also not really a translation—is the term “*kin-dom*.” I first heard this play on “kingdom” used by the late Bishop Kenneth Untener of Saginaw, Michigan, USA in a talk he gave at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago.¹⁰ Similar to Trinitarian theologians play on *perichoresis* to speak of Trinitarian relationships as a never-ending and world-including dance, this wordplay points to the new possibilities of kinship that God offers and is working for in the world—a kinship of all the world’s peoples and kinship as well with creation itself. In his popular books on his work with gangs in East Los Angeles, Gregory Boyle speaks of how Christians must acknowledge and develop “radical kinship” among all peoples.¹¹ As I have indicated already in this Introduction, African American Willie Jennings uses the term “revolutionary intimacy” to refer to the message of the gospel in his commentary on the Acts of the Apostles.¹² Terrence Tilley points out that eminent African American biblical scholar Clarence Jordan translates the Greek *basileas* “the God Movement.”¹³ Irish theologian and ethicist Enda McDonagh offers another intriguing phrase that I think can identify the reality of Jesus’ use of *basileatoutheou*. McDonagh speaks of the goal of Christianity as the establishment of *shalom* (the rich Hebrew word for peace—and more), and renders it in English as “flourishing in community.”¹⁴ New Zealand theologian Neil Darragh proposes the term “realm of God” as “what the world would be like if it were in accordance with the will of a benevolent God.” It is a dynamic state—already present today, but moving toward fulfillment—of what he names as “wellbeing.”¹⁵ My own solution in this book is to use all these words at one time or another and to juxtaposed them to one another, depending on how they “sound” in a sentence, or to offer variety of expression. None is perfect, but using all of them might somehow approach the richness of the concept, which, as I will point out in Chapter 1, comes out more in the story of Jesus than in a definition.

Such kinship has already been inaugurated *by and in Jesus*. Jesus’ mission of mercy, justice, inclusion, and healing was a sign of the inbreaking of this new order of possibilities, and

¹⁰ The introduction of the wordplay of “kin-dom” has been attributed to Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “Solidarity: Love of Neighbor in the 1980s,” in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 31–40.

¹¹ Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 187–212; and in *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

¹² Jennings, *Acts*, 29.

¹³ See Terrence W. Tilley, *The Disciples’ Jesus: Christology as Reconciling Practice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 1, note 1).

¹⁴ Enda McDonagh, “From Shoah to Shalom: The Case for Abolishing War in the Twenty-first Century,” in *Vulnerable to the Holy: In Faith, Morality, and Art* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2004), 133 (127–36).

¹⁵ Darragh, *But What Is The Church For?*, 40. Darragh develops the term “wellbeing” in Chapter 4, 41–51.

Jesus himself, the *autobasilea* in Origen's famous description,¹⁶ was already the full expression of the new kinship that God, in the power of the Spirit, was about in the world.

The central thesis of this book is that the church *shares and continues* that mission. At Pentecost, the disciples were anointed with the same Spirit with which Jesus was anointed at his baptism, and, as the Acts of the Apostles is at pains to show, take Jesus' place in the world and continue his mission—a reality that Paul in particular recognizes in much of the imagery by which he describes the significance of Christian Baptism—for example, adopted sonship and daughterhood, identity as the Body of Christ in the world, conformity to Christ, putting on Christ.

The church shares and continues Jesus' ministry both *within itself and within the world*. On the one hand, the church needs to evangelize itself; it is constantly in need of evangelization (EN 15), forgiveness, purification, inspiration, and formation. But it does this—and this is the task of the church's pastoral work—not simply to make itself perfect or make itself “worthy of salvation,” but in order to evangelize the world by the credibility of its witness and the zeal of working for the new kinship of the reign of God that deeper knowledge and deeper spirituality inspires it to.

Finally the church's missionary commitment and life is *ritually enacted and celebrated in both Word and Sacrament*. It is in the attentive reading of and meditating on the Word, especially in the context of the church's liturgy, that the church experiences a “rehearsal for ministry,” and prepares for the “liturgy after the liturgy,”¹⁷ by which Christians live out the gospel in the witness of their daily lives. The church at worship is most fully the church, especially at Eucharist, the high point of which is its dismissal into the world to “glorify God by your lives.”¹⁸ Liturgy indeed is a missionary act, nourishing the church for its missionary life.

The Meaning of Church in This Book

What does the word “church” mean in this book? First and foremost, church means in these pages any community of Christian faith, however large or however small, from the worldwide community of local churches that make up the church universal, to the “two or three” (Matt 18:20) gathered in Jesus' name for prayer, witness, sharing of life, or apostolic activity. Vatican II speaks of the reality of the church “in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful” that are “united with their pastors” (LG 26). These could be “particular churches,” in other words, dioceses (see LG 13), parishes—territorial or other kinds, communities such as the basic ecclesial communities or small Christian communities that have sprung up all over the world in the last fifty years, those of women and men of the various forms consecrated life, or any community gathered around the Eucharistic table of Word and Sacrament, even if these “are frequently small and poor, or living far from any other” (LG 26). We can also speak of the

¹⁶ Origen, Commentary on Matthew, Book XIV.7 (commentary on Matt 18:23), <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/101614.htm>. See Fred Sanders, “The Kingdom in Person,” *The Scriptorium* (July 28, 2015), <http://scriptoriumdaily.com/the-kingdom-in-person/>.

¹⁷ See Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 362-66.

¹⁸ Dismissal Rite, Revised Roman Missal. See Gregory Augustine Pierce, *The Mass Is Never Ended* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2007).

family as the “domestic church” (LG 11) the “ecclesiola,” in which the parents become the first evangelizers of their children. British Anglican theologian Michael Moynagh speaks about “new ecclesial communities” that have sprung up in many parts of the world as a result of the “fresh expressions” movement in Anglican and other churches throughout the world. Fellow Anglican theologian Pete Ward speaks of these ecclesiological innovations as “liquid church” and “liquid ecclesiology.”¹⁹

The citation of Anglican theologians raises the ecumenical question. From the ecumenical perspective of Roman Catholicism (from which this book is written) we can speak of the Orthodox Churches as churches in their own right, and of other Christian communities of faith (e.g. Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, Evangelical communities, and Pentecostal communities) as churches or “ecclesial communities” who possess “some, even very many, of the most significant elements or endowments which together go to build up and give life to the church itself” (UR 3, 18, 19).²⁰

When we speak of church in this book, therefore, I also want to include any and all of these Christian communities. Although I write this book as a Roman Catholic, I also want to write it as much as possible in a thoroughly ecumenical spirit. Everything I say about the church in these pages refers, *mutatis mutandis*, to any or all of the above expressions of communal Christian faith.

¹⁹ Michael Moynagh, *Church in Life: Innovation, Mission, and Ecclesiology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018); Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002) and *Liquid Ecclesiology: The Gospel and the Church* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

²⁰ Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church*, 106-17.