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Toward a NEW MODEL of church

Balancing DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY with COMMUNITY OF CAREGIVERS

The year 2009 marked the 35th anniversary of the first edition of Cardinal Avery Dulles's extant book *Models of the Church*. Identified as a work in "comparative ecclesiology," it addressed major differences concerning the nature and purpose of the church. In his book, the late eminent Catholic theologian developed a typology of five different models: church as (1) institution, (2) mystical communion, (3) sacrament, (4) herald, and (5) servant. He concludes by integrating each model's positive characteristics into a seamless comprehensive model of church. In a 1987 second edition, he developed a sixth model, "church as community of disciples," based on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology of discipleship and Raymond Brown's ecclesiology of the Gospel of St. John.

The ecclesial landscape has changed dramatically since Dulles's bold theological vision. Shifts in Roman Catholic ecclesiology, ecumenism, and episcopal leadership seem to be "undercutting" Dulles's articulation of polarities in discerning different theological ways of answering the question "What is the church?" This article will attempt to engage that question with these shifts in mind. Compared to 1974, the current ecclesial issues border more on serving individual hubris and championing orthodoxy rather than on preserving the history and tradition of Roman Catholic ecclesiology and the emerging vision in the documents of Vatican II. Dulles deepens and enriches tradition with his theological vision. The contemporary shifts, evident in a viral tone of rhetoric and public hierarchical disputes, give the impression of redirecting the mission of the church away from unity toward a corporate mentality of "win or lose."

I will focus on three areas in

addressing these shifts in ecclesiology. First, I believe the propensity of some church leaders to champion their positions on certain issues in a manner equivalent to public warfare is disingenuous to the mission of ongoing ecclesial renewal. I will compare this behavioral aspect of church identity to a dysfunctional family. Second, Dulles's models contained both strengths and weaknesses; in this respect they advanced a model of church as a healthy family. I will address how I believe characteristics of healthy families can enrich a spirituality of church. Finally, I will expand Dulles's late model of church as "community of disciples" to fit a model of church as "community of caregivers."

Church as dysfunctional family

According to an article written for a program entitled *Help Yourself*, created by the counseling services of Kansas State University, "Family dysfunction

can be any condition that interferes with healthy family functioning" ("Dysfunctional Families"). The creators of this program advocate a belief that deficient parents hurt their children more by omission than commission. Chronic mental illness, physical disability, alcoholism, child abuse, and extreme parental rigidity and control are issues that interfere with family functioning. In some cases children are robbed of their childhood when they are forced into the role of parent caretakers. The feelings of inadequacy and guilt triggered in these children carry over into adulthood. Many of them do not survive the transition without help maturing into healthy adults.

According to John J. Cecero, SJ, we become who we are by the confluence of parental, family, biological, and environmental factors. "They account for whether you feel secure in relationships with your spouse, partners, and friends, or if you are more cautious and suspicious about the enduring nature of these relationships" (15). According to Cecero, the quality of these relationships determines how we maneuver our way along the path of maturity. "Life traps" such as abandonment, mistrust, abuse, dependence, and entitlement and how we survive them in childhood determine the degree of function or dysfunction in adulthood.

The current ecclesial landscape contains a smorgasbord of issues. These include the Vatican investigation of U.S. women religious communities; the fiery rhetoric between bishops, hierarchy, and laity on abortion; the punishing of pro-choice Catholic politicians by refusing them holy communion; the extraordinary process of mainstreaming disenchanting Anglicans into the Catholic Church with no parallel outreach and process for married Catholic clergy in good standing. The tone of the public debate is birthing a model of church similar to a dysfunctional family. In this model some family members have transitioned through the life traps and live with a mature sense of peace and fulfillment; others are still stuck, evidenced by a

scolding temperament fed by control and suspicion. I believe the latter category falls into what Ronald Rolheiser calls "the catholic fundamentalist" (130).

What is disingenuous about church as a dysfunctional family is the impression that issues are valued more than people. The ongoing process of ecclesial renewal is impoverished when all issues are reduced to only one: namely, abortion. I detest this evil because it contradicts the biblical tradition that the creation of life is God's business, and humanity is not empowered to interfere in God's business. But the behavior of some in the Christian community on this issue echoes the self-righteousness of the fundamentalist: "I am right and you are wrong." This has become such a banner cry for some church leaders that abortion as a pro-life issue is morphing into a pro-fetus movement, and the violent rhetoric fuels lynch-mob hysteria. This does little to restore respect and confidence in the hierarchy who practiced a different form of pro-choice when they chose to harbor pedophile priests rather than provide pastoral care to sexual abuse victims. Voices loud in defense of the unborn but silent in defense of the living, whose lives were emotionally aborted in childhood as victims of sex abuse, are not grounded in a Christology that teaches a Jesus who never ridicules the violence or injustice he seeks to change. An ecclesiology with a biblically rooted Christology is the tradition that will push a model of church as dysfunctional family to become a model of church as healthy family.

Church as healthy family

One of the values of Avery Dulles's five models of church is the absence of an argument that one is far superior to all the rest. As a result he presents a balanced theology of the church by naming the major strengths and weaknesses of each ecclesiological type. Respecting the rich history of Roman Catholic ecclesiology, he incorporates the new shifts within Vatican II and shows genuine sensitivity to the spirit

of ecumenism that pervaded that great conciliar event.

The fundamental strength of his five models of ecclesiology is that they are derived from scriptural images "and from the 'the corporate experience of the faithful'" (Sarah). The genius of this method holds in tension the past history of Christian theology with the present lived experience of the community of faith, giving both the contemporary context and the tradition equal importance. From the perspective of strengths and weaknesses, Dulles's models value a "both-and" rather than an "either-or" attitude toward ecclesiology. In this respect the church is the beneficiary of a healthy way to articulate and experience a mystery that cannot be exhausted.

According to John Cecero, psychotherapy is a healthy option in reversing unhealthy patterns that are the result of being imprisoned by life traps. Reversal involves persistence and a willingness to risk new patterns of thinking and behaving (26). The church as healthy family embraces conversion therapy as its contribution toward changing both thinking and behavior. It is focused on realigning one's heart to beat in rhythm with the divine heart. For people of faith, prayer, spiritual direction, retreats, pastoral counseling, faith-sharing groups, Bible study, pilgrimages, novenas, and centering prayer are some of the spiritual traditions that free hearts stuck in old life traps to be resuscitated to new life by encountering Jesus Christ.

Conversion therapy is interior change with exterior manifestations. It is a private journey — in the company of other sojourners. It involves a level of intimacy with the divine in self and reconnection with the divine in others. "All of these can soften the rigidity of the life trap and prepare you for a healthier perspective on yourself and your future" (34).

The element of ongoing individual conversion as a powerful grace in the renewal of ecclesial life is what links the strengths and weaknesses of Dulles's five models of church. Such an inclusive approach nuances all five models as healthy images of the mystery of the

church. Dulles avoids the trap of favoritism by extolling what is both strong and weak in each model. In doing so, his methodology reveals a mature and inclusive way for calling the unhealthy aspects of an unconverted church to live in tension with what makes the church healthy. This schema of church as healthy family portrays Dulles as both a theologian and a bridge builder with a healthy sense of balance.

We need more people today who can build on Dulles's method of guiding the contemporary church in dialogue with the rich traditions of ecclesiology in a way that nurtures a model of church as a healthy family. Converting the heart and stirring the imagination require adopting a new lens to see things as God sees them and not as we would like them to be. In the words of a wisdom saying, "We do not see things the way they are; we see things the way we are." I am convinced that Dulles's five models helped people see the church through the lens of both his scholarly research and his own converted imagination.

Adopting a model of church as a healthy family would help to balance the riches of our history with our contemporary context. This model holds in tension the DNA of our sinful behavior with the desire for spiritual freedom and renewal. In this model, we lean on God and each other in the process of getting free of the dysfunctional voices of guilt and anger so we can live with the healthy voices of trust and hope. We seek relationships with others based on a Trinitarian model of mutual respect. We work at dialogue as a spiritual antidote to edict and practice patience as a biblical tool of behavioral change.

Church as a healthy family has the capacity of empathy for those who struggle with their life traps. A healthy family is resilient to stress, which can expand hearts to adapt to change with less resistance. A healthy family is committed to the kind of interior growth that nurtures Christian communities to overcome the unhealthy life patterns that block the power of redemption from freeing us of yesterday's sins. A healthy family is able to hold in tension the biblical

dualisms of exodus and exile, forgiveness and revenge, change of heart and hardness of heart. A healthy family works to embrace the moral imperatives in the Bible that are the roots of scriptural catechesis. Church as a healthy family hastens the emergence of church as a community of caregivers.

Church as community of caregivers

In a sixth model, Avery Dulles highlights the image of the church as a "community of disciples." In a June 2009 issue of *America* magazine, the editors noted that "this image from the early church (Acts 6:1-2) sees every Christian united in learning from and following Christ." In this model, the church empowered by the Holy Spirit is always growing in the common mission of fully possessing the truth. "A disciple is one who has not yet arrived, but is on the way to full conversion. This more humble view images a pilgrim church always in need of purification and improvement."

In light of my clinical connections of church as dysfunctional family, the emergence of an image of church as community of caregivers is worth exploring. It is born out of a personal experience. Recently my own family put aside its dysfunctions to practice caregiving with our dying mother. Personal agendas and lifestyles were subordinated to the concerns of quality care for our mother. Schedules and hearts that sometimes conflicted with family ties took a backseat to the needs of Mom's health care. Caregiving instincts kicked in as we bonded together to provide care for her. The grace of purification happened when we each experienced a spiritual dying of our personal issues.

The image of church as a community of caregivers is similar. Such a community bonds pilgrims together at different places on the spiritual path, united in the common desire to practice care in the likeness of God. This image is rooted in the biblical tradition of God as divine caregiver. In the words of Ronald Rolheiser, this tradition recognizes "that the God whom Jesus called 'Father' beats up on no one" (188).

God as divine caregiver tolerated dysfunctional siblings when Cain killed his brother Abel, when Judah persuaded his eleven brothers to sell Joseph into slavery rather than kill him, when Benjamin was falsely accused of a crime, when King David conspired to have an innocent man and husband murdered out of lust for his wife, when Peter denied knowing Jesus, when Jesus was crucified, and when Paul persecuted the new Christians. Ours is not a tradition of faith in a small God. Our God's power lies at the deepest level in all things and, in the end, will have the last word beyond our puny human words. Our God practices genuine caregiving with all creatures. If God can forgive human dysfunction and care about the quality of our lives before our deaths, then what do we mean by our lack of charity and respect in civil discourse, which impugns our call to reveal our caring God to others?

Church as community of caregivers means behaving in a manner that reveals hearts with more than one room. We must care about the struggle for common ground by not reducing it to winning or losing, but staying faithful to the traditions of Scripture, theology, prayer, and pastoring souls. We must care about ongoing conversion and renewal, espousing them as higher goals than coercion and polarization. We must care about the image of church as disciples or caregivers as a healthier tradition than the emerging dysfunctional model of church as political storm chaser. We must care about the common good being a more noble mission than the cause of one issue, right or wrong.

These cares bind many people together as caregivers and put a human, caring face on the gospel of Jesus Christ. The tradition of a savior as caregiver began with the incarnation, continued in the paschal events of death and resurrection, and will come to fulfillment when the day of glory comes. In the meantime, we live caught between those caring divine interventions in our salvation history and the practice of human spiritual caregiving in our own historical context. Our cause is more than a Hallmark card

jingle, "caring enough to send the very best." We are to seek an answer to the ecclesial question: how do we care enough to be vessels of the revelation of a caring God?

Church as community of caregivers is an invitation to use our voices for the kind of charity and love that is rooted in the prophetic tradition of our faith. It could be a balm of Gilead that honors the divine in every person and advances a respect for dialogue that, according to Cardinal Dulles, enables the church "to understand its teaching better, to present it more persuasively and to implement it in a pastoral way" (*America*).

Works Cited

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