Spring 2016

Plausibility of Decentralized Ecclesial Structures for a Post-Institutional American Catholic Church

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PLAUSIBILITY OF DECENTRALIZED ECCLESIAL STRUCTURES
FOR A POST-INSTITUTIONAL AMERICAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY PROGRAM
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF THEOLOGY

DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

Structural change is needed if the American Catholic Church is to navigate the changing postmodern landscape forged by the social and cultural forces of the twenty-first century. In a post-institutional context marked by dwindling human and financial resources and a loss of confidence in the hierarchically-shaped church, decentralized ecclesial structures hold a positive and hopeful outlook for the local church. This dissertation argues for the plausibility of a decentralized structural dimension of the church as modeled by the Catholic Worker, Latin American base ecclesial communities, and Women-Church movements.

In following an inductive method of ecclesiology, a description of each of the ecclesial movements is given with subsequent identification of the socio-religious contextual factors in which the movements emerged. The works of the founders and key theologians are mined for theological and philosophical principles that inform the decentralized nature of the ecclesial models. Analysis and interpretation, the last step in the inductive method, establishes that the decentralized ecclesial movements are governed by the logic of mission rather than the logic of power as in the institutional model and function to mobilize the people of God for creative and innovative approaches to the church’s missionary imperative. Therefore, as ecclesial structures that animate the church’s mission to continue the ministry and teaching of Jesus in the world, the movements remain anchored in the origins of the early church and are unified with the universal church by a shared mission. Lastly, the role of the centralized dimension of the church is affirmed as a function of preserving the cosmic scope of the Jesus-normed mission across all times and cultures.

Implications of the study suggest that the postmodern climate presents the American Catholic Church with a unique opportunity to establish non-hierarchical structures that catalyze
mission-driven ministry at the sub-parish levels. A tandem model is introduced in which the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the church are envisioned as structurally normative. Rhizomatic and arborescent imagery suggests a novel way the church can envision decentralized structures systemically, in tandem with hierarchical structures, and thereby maintain the tension of centralization and decentralization so vital to Catholic ecclesiology.
DEDICATION

For my boys and their generation.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Church is never built but always in a state of being constructed. The job requires so many types of builders and anyone can find a place in the project. Many plans will be required too before the real restructuring gets underway.

James Drane, 1969

I am most grateful to my dissertation committee, Maureen O’Connell and Natalia Imperatori-Lee, and especially Maggie McGuinness who let me be curious and independent, but never unattended as I made my way through Catholic studies. I am equally indebted to Father Frank Berna whose invitation to contribute to the academic and ministerial community at La Salle gave me a place to call home along the way. I must also acknowledge my unsung heroes: Jen Johnson who, without judgment, quietly collected the excessive number of commas I used in the first drafts and threw them out; my husband who read every word, sometimes twice, and made me revise any sentence that exceeded his six-line maximum; and my friend Helen at the American Pub diner who kept my coffee warm and never let me doubt that I would finish “my work.”

I am proud to have shared the journey with fellow doctoral students in the program, especially the women of my cohort, Maureen, Miriam, Kathleen, Michelle, and Sue. They made an arduous journey not only possible but also enjoyable because we shared in it together. For my husband Keith, I am eternally grateful for his steady support and for always “staying the course, holding the line, keeping it all together.” For my sons, Seth and Kobe, who grew into young men while I was doing my doctoral work, I pray that my example has been worthy and that they are inspired to find their place in the church, in whatever form it takes.

Finally, for fellow builders of the church that I have encountered along the way and that have taught me how to be the church, to love the church, to pastor the church, and to challenge the church, your multitude of voices can be heard woven into my words. Thank you for the voice you have shaped within me.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Contribution to Ecclesiology and Methodological Approach”

The decline in influence and relevance of the institutional Catholic Church in the U.S. has gained the attention of social scientists and theologians for the last couple of decades. Sociologists use metrics such as the drop in Mass attendance, the diminishing number of available clergy, unsustainable parish resources, and the rising levels of distrust toward the institutional church to flag concerns for its future.\(^1\) While most remedies to the crisis seek to secure future resources, sustain buildings, and revitalize parishes, theologian Gerard Mannion suggests that much less effort has been given to rethinking church structures and modes of governance. “A more helpful approach would be to focus on the future of the church’s organization and structure, seeking to end its outdated hierarchicalism. The hierarchy is not only an alien form of governance in a postmodern world; it has always been at odds with the gospel and communitarian ethic of Jesus of Nazareth.”\(^2\) The aim of this dissertation is to contribute toward that end.

**Contribution to Ecclesiology: A Response to the Decline of the Institutional Model of Church**

A decline in the church’s human and financial resources gives due cause to question its capacity to sustain the institutional paradigm into the twenty-first century. Sociologist of

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American religion, Robert Wuthnow asserts, “Because [the institution] requires resources to exist, these places of worship exist only to the extent that they are able to adapt to their environments.”³ In addition, regardless of the future availability of institutional resources, sociologist Dean Hoge reports a growing trend that is eroding the foundation of the established church: “Americans are slowly losing trust in their large institutions.”⁴ The greatest degree of skepticism is evident in younger generations and, as a result, “the overall shift affects how young persons look at churches and Church teachings.”⁵

While the future of the institutional model is dubious at best, the parish system, intimately wed to the institutional model, is also likely to face challenges. Two factors will affect the sustainability of the local parish: an aging generation of post-Vatican II Boomers and a notable indifference among young adult generations towards involvement in parish life. The shortage of available and willing participants to provide for the local parish’s liturgical, educational, and administrative needs will be a central concern in the American church.

D’Antonio et al, in *American Catholics Today*,⁶ offers a sociological analysis that quantifies, by generation, degrees of commitment to the church as institution model. According to the report, pre-Vatican II Catholics ranked highest in commitment, followed by Vatican II Catholics, with post-Vatican II Catholics in third place. In last place, the Millennial generation scored at zero percent, meaning that, of the pool of Millennials surveyed, not one participant

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⁵ Ibid.

indicated a degree of “high commitment” to the institutional paradigm. D’Antonio comments that groups identified as highly committed are essential to sustaining the future of the parish system—“they provide the core elements of parish life. They provide the leadership, volunteer labor, and crucial financial support. They are the lectors and Eucharistic ministers who have become vital parts of the contemporary life. They are also among the more than 30,000 lay Catholics who work within the institutional Church at parish and diocesan levels.”

As each successive generation of highly committed participants continues to age and becomes unable to take responsibility for the parish, it is unlikely that the Millennial generation will assume core parish functions. In addition, theologians who argue for renewal of the parish system through the pursuit of democratic and participatory structures may be disappointed in the diminishing commitment of young adults to the institutional church. Feminist theologians have been the earliest and strongest voices in calling for lay participation in decision-making roles in the church. Without the participation of younger generations, however, the plausibility of a reformed democratic-based institutional model remains in question.

Given the unfortunate outlook of the post-institutional church, this dissertation explores the organizational structures of three decentralized ecclesial movements, including the Catholic Worker, base ecclesial communities (BECs) of Latin America, and Women-Church, in order to argue for the plausibility of a decentralized structural dimension for the future shape of the church. The three movements have been selected because 1) their deliberate decentralized structures are based on theological and/or philosophical ideologies of their founders and adhering theologians; 2) each movement demonstrates a viable, concrete ecclesial existence at the sub-parish level; and 3) each structure inherently represents resistance to the logic of power that

7 Ibid., 40.
governs the institutional paradigm. The value of a study in decentralized ecclesial structures is to find an alternative yet viable non-hierarchical model for the church that is sustainable in the long term. In a changing post-institutional context marked by dwindling resources and a loss of confidence in the hierarchically-shaped church, decentralized ecclesial forms hold a positive and hopeful outlook for the Catholic Church.

**The Inductive Approach and Working Assumptions**

Three key Catholic ecclesiologists argue for an inductive approach in the study of the church. In his three-volume series on historical ecclesiology entitled *Christian Community in History*, Roger Haight offers a comparison of the competing methods of an ecclesiology “from above” and “from below.” He characterizes the difference: “Against the background of an ecclesiology that is abstract, idealist, and a-historical, an ecclesiology from below is concrete, realist, and historically conscious.”

Gerard Mannion, in *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity*, explores the philosophical reasons for an inductive approach to ecclesiology. Paul Lakeland, in *Church: Living Communion*, offers a concise overview of an inductive approach relying upon Bernard Lonergan’s discussion of the shift from a classist view of theology to one subject to the realities of historical and contextual change. The church is “less as a static, unchanging, and ‘perfect’ reality, and more as a sort of collective incarnate subject, moved and changed by the

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same forces that affect the human person.”\textsuperscript{10} He argues that an ecclesiology from below requires “consistent attention to the life of the church at the grassroots.”\textsuperscript{11} Therefore, in an inductive approach, theologians become “participant-observers” who make observations “close enough to the grassroots to gauge accurately the ways in which the Church is developing as a faith community.”\textsuperscript{12}

An inductive ecclesiology begins with a composite description of local expressions of the church. Description in search of an accurate account of the church, however, is best done within the bounds of at least two qualifiers. First, description must give account of the church as \textit{it concretely exists} in the world. A study of the church, according to Haight, that is historically conscious draws “attention to the actual church as it exists in history in various times and places. The primary object of ecclesiology is the historical organization that has a historical life; to understand it, one must attend it.”\textsuperscript{13} Description acknowledges local expressions of the church as human and social realities; therefore, when grounded in reality it discloses the fact that the church emerged and continues to emerge in response to complex contextual forces and within a given set of historical circumstances.

In addition, an accurate description of the church from the perspective of the theologian requires collaboration with social scientists and others who approach a study of the church with an empirical and scientific interest. In some measure, the work of the theologian is a “work of

\textsuperscript{10} Paul Lakeland, \textit{Church: Living Communion} (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 123.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 128.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.

the imagination” and “must always be a servant of the facts.” A temptation to censor or to “clean up” accounts of the church is resisted in the inductive method so as to avoid distorted historical versions of the church, or perhaps taken to an extreme, the construction of a sanitized version of the church without factual support. Therefore, more than the mere tool of description, Lakeland calls for “intelligent attention” in the inductive method. The theologian’s description put under the restraint of actual data on the state of the church authenticates the theologian’s work. “If social sciences are doing their work efficiently they accurately produce a picture of the ecclesial community as it actually is, regardless of what theologians or Church leaders claim it is or should be.” Consequently, the inductive method rests on the foundation of an accurate description of the local church as it exists and brings to light any contextual factors that shaped not only its beginnings, but also its ongoing present and future development as a human and social reality.

The end pursuit of an inductive ecclesiology is to discover the potentially overlooked realities of ecclesial existence, which when drawn together provide a fuller understanding of the church in its entirety. Haight reminds us that the dialectic of the church both as universal and particular is made apparent in an inductive approach: “Every conception of the whole church will be filtered through the lens of a particular church; each particular ecclesiology should be relativized by being presented within the horizon of the wider Christian movement.” Lakeland suggests that through such a process “we learn that the Church is far more culturally, ethically, and religiously pluralistic than any of our theological blueprints envisage. And we see any and

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14 Lakeland, Church: Living Communion, 134.

15 Ibid.

16 Haight, Christian Community in History, Vol. 1, 42.
every local invitation of God’s faithful people, Catholic or Protestant, as a little piece of the story.”

The inductive approach, therefore, is central to this project because it allows portraits of the existing, yet marginal, expressions of the church to be brought forward for study in ecclesiology. In gaining a fuller understanding of the church in its many diverse expressions, there are principles from which the established institutional church can benefit in order that a viable future might be envisioned for the church in a post-institutional context.

**Attentive Listening to the Margins**

Feminist theologians have played a role as some of the earliest inductive ecclesiologists whose study began not with the abstract, universal principles of the church but with women’s experience of church. One of the many ways they have been of service to theology is in offering a critique of the white, European male perspective whose experience is typically normalized in a Western interpretation of church. In the vision to overcome the patriarchal interpretations, feminist theologians have encouraged us to discover the value of marginal voices as sources of theological insight and inspiration. The marginal voices of the institutional church both challenge and reimagine a different ecclesiology for the future.

Feminist theologian Mary Hines, in “Ecclesiology for a Public Church: The United States Context,” agrees, stating that by listening to the popular movements the American Catholic

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17 Lakeland, *Church: Living Communion*, 130.


church can be re-envisioned. “[T]he voices of the marginalized, whether the poor, women, or new immigrants, for example, may well be an expression of the Spirit calling the church to a new self-understanding.” Moreover, reflecting on Edward Schillebeeckx’s empirical approach in *The Church with a Human Face*, Hines suggests that it has often been out of the “illegal practice” at the base of the church from which authentic development and teaching has emerged throughout church history. As such, the three decentralized ecclesial movements proposed in this study have in various capacities displaced themselves from the mainstream institutional church; consequently, each movement has the potential to offer theological insights about the future development of ecclesial structures.

**Haight’s Principle of Functionality**

Because this dissertation is a project that envisions alternative ecclesial structures, I will employ Roger Haight’s principle of functionality and the three criteria for ecclesial and ministerial structures as a theological assumption. In “The Structures of the Church,” he proposes a historical-theological approach to understanding the logic behind the emergence of ecclesial structures and offices of the early church. The “principle of functionality,” Haight claims, is the method or logic by which ecclesial structures and offices should be measured for the ability to mediate ministry and the capacity to animate the church’s mission. In other words, the structure is assessed based on its functional capacity to provide for the ministerial

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20 Ibid., 44.

21 Ibid.


needs of the community and to move the mission and ministry of Jesus forward in the world. According to Haight, structures should not only be qualified by their ability to mediate ministry, but also by the ability to “mediate the presence of God as Spirit in the memory of Jesus”\(^\text{24}\) as was evident in the early church.

In addition, Haight identifies three criteria for assessing, comparing, and analyzing ministerial offices and structures for their capacity to actualize particular theological outcomes and practices of the church. They include the memory of Jesus’s life and ministry, a growing communitarian spirit, and a shared responsibility for the mission of the church. These norms answer the following questions: 1) Does the ecclesial structure function to embody the core values as evident in the teaching and ministry of Jesus?; 2) Does it function to sustain a communitarian spirit understood as the presence of the Spirit as the “force that holds the community together in bonds of faith and love”?\(^\text{25}\); and 3) Does it function to promote the mission of the church as the responsibility of the whole church? Each decentralized ecclesial movement in the study will undergo analysis by these three criteria and, subsequently, function as a model of stability to indicate the capacity for decentralized structure to be anchored in the origins of the early church and thus, the universal church.

*The Norm of Right Relation for Ecclesial Structures*

Finally, the vision for Christian community is to be understood through the teaching, ministry, and life of Jesus of Nazareth as recorded in the Christian scriptures and specifically the Gospel accounts. Desirable structures are forms in which the church is witness to “the most redemptive in human relations: just, lovely, and truthful relationality that fosters mutual respect.

\(^{24}\) Ibid.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 414.
A church that has become a paradigm of the opposite of all those traits falls below, rather than rises above, the ‘world’ to which it is sent to speak God’s saving word.”26 Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom of God informs practices of just community and life together; therefore, such norms must determine what it means for Christians to be in cosmic right relationship with God, with each other, and with the world such that the vision for universal human flourishing is being realized. The church’s organization of people and its practices of power must fall into alignment with this norm.

Using an inductive method of ecclesiology conducted under the guidance of the assumptions outlined above, I aim to demonstrate that decentralized ecclesial structures, as modeled by the Catholic Worker, BECs, and Women-Church, can play a normative role in the American Catholic Church where the institutional model is increasingly anachronistic for the postmodern religious experience.

Outline of Chapters

Chapters two, three, and four are organized to achieve the goals of description as indicated by the inductive method. The material included creates a composite description of the Catholic Worker, BECs, and Women-church, while analysis and implications of the material are postponed until chapters five and six. Because the historical, sociological, and theological factors are principally key starting points of an informed description of the church, each chapter shares a common template: historical origins and contextual factors that influence the movement’s emergence, key theologian and or founders’ rationale for the movement’s decentralized structure, qualifications for meeting Haight’s criteria, and anomalies to the intended

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decentralized ecclesial structure. Such arrangement of the material proves helpful for a comparative analysis in the latter chapters. While ideally the inductive method calls first for description followed by analysis, there is some ambiguity in actual practice of the method. Nevertheless, it is my intention that the process of “intelligent attention” is evident in the descriptive material of the three ecclesial movements such that chapters two through four construct a solid foundation for analysis and implications of the study in chapters five and six.

Chapter two is devoted to the Catholic Worker as a personalist social movement that is organizationally conceived as an anarchist network of houses of hospitality. The primary sources include the writings of Dorothy Day and, to a lesser extent, Peter Maurin. The emergence of the movement is situated in early twentieth-century urban America and considers the socio-economic impact of the Great Depression, the papal encyclicals that defined the social mission of the church, and Day’s personal conviction to wed her Catholic faith to social activism. Day and Maurin are best considered activists more than theologians; however, the philosophical foundation of personalism by which the Catholic Worker was established underscores the essential role of a governing ethic rather than an organizational structure. This proves to be an important contribution in arguing for the plausibility of non-hierarchical ecclesial structures in a postmodern milieu. Because the reform of ecclesial structures was not the central focus of Day and Maurin’s writings, secondary sources will be used for a more robust description of the development of the network of hospitality communities over the life of the movement.

Chapter three describes the base ecclesial communities (BECs)27 movement of Latin America. The chapter first situates the emergence of the Latin American-based movement in the

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27 Base ecclesial communities (BECs) is the English translation for comunidades eclesiales de base (CEBs) more commonly used in the Latin American literature. While this dissertation uses the designation “BECs”, some direct quotes remain unchanged from the original language of CEBs.
context of global and local systemic poverty. Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff and his critique of the church’s institutional power structures serves as the theological basis of the chapter, which is mostly drawn from *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* and *Church, Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*. Boff’s description of the organizational design of base ecclesial communities, the governing theological substructure, and the argument for his stance against the institutional church as primary model, makes him a key theologian in a study on the plausibility of a decentralized dimension of church structures. While the BEC movement was not born out of a U.S. context, the church gathered as small community is a foundational model for a local, decentralized ecclesial expression at the sub-parish level; therefore, it is applicable across many contexts. Such a non-hierarchical ecclesial structure, for example, has proven successful for Millennial Protestants in a U.S. context.

The focus of chapter four is Women-Church and the development of feminist communities of liberation in the United States. The primary sources are that of the earliest feminist theologians and activists in the movement, including Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Mary Hunt. Women-Church is first situated in the twentieth century second-wave feminist movement and the rising consciousness of the need for women’s liberation from a patriarchal church. Schüssler Fiorenza’s work on “discipleship of equals” as an ecclesial model and the organizational adaptation of the kyriarchal-governed institutional church qualifies her as a significant theologian in exploring the plausibility of decentralized ecclesial structures as an alternative to the institutional hierarchical model.

Chapter five outlines a comparative analysis and interpretation based on the sociological, historical, and theological observations gathered on the Catholic Worker, BECs, and Women-
Church movements in previous chapters. The chapter is divided into two parts. Part I identifies the shift in logic from that of power which governs the hierarchical model to the logic of mission that drives the decentralized structures. Part II establishes that the logic of mission, which governs structures to mediate ministry and to achieve the mission of the church, anchors the movements in the Christian tradition and the origins of the early church. As a final annotation, I affirm the role of the centralized dimension of the church that serves to preserve the integrity and cosmic scope of the Jesus-normed mission across all times and cultures.

Chapter six proposes that while the established centralized structure of the institutional Catholic Church can be obstructive to achieving mission, the postmodern climate presents a unique opportunity to establish decentralized ecclesial structures that catalyze mission-driven, innovative ministry at the sub-parish level. As modeled by the Catholic Worker, BECs, and Women-Church, decentralized ecclesial structures governed by the logic of mission are the most suitable model for engaging in missional praxis. I introduce rhizomatic and arborescent imagery to suggest a novel way the church can envision decentralized structures systemically, in tandem with hierarchical structures, thereby maintaining the tension of centralization and decentralization so vital to Catholic ecclesiology.

In sum, this dissertation proposes that structural change is needed if the Catholic Church is to navigate the shifting cultural landscape brought by the postmodern paradigm. Decentralized ecclesial structures as modeled by BECs, Women-Church, and the Catholic Worker movements are a plausible option for the post-institutional Catholic Church when conceived in tandem with centralized structures and organized to mobilize the church for creative and innovative approaches to its missionary imperative in the twenty-first century.
CHAPTER TWO: THE CATHOLIC WORKER

“A Network of Personalist Communities Model”

People came up, introduced themselves, and went on about their business. By the end of the day, both of us were utterly bewildered as to who was actually running the place. Some of the people were “obviously” clients, but it was rather unclear as to who was “staff” . . . . It appeared that everyone identified themselves as Catholic Workers and others as clients. Everyone seemed free to create his or her own role, and everyone seemed happy with it . . . . We debated about who actually ran the place—after an eight-hour visit, we had no idea who was actually “in charge.” Things seemed to have been accomplished without anyone exercising authority.28

The Catholic Worker movement emerged in early twentieth-century urban America in the midst of the economic devastation of the Great Depression. Organically organized as a network of personalist communities, the movement’s mission was simply to do the works of mercy daily when a person in need was encountered. For founder Dorothy Day, the Catholic Worker was the answer to a personal conviction to wed her Catholic faith to social activism. Rather than an organizational structure, the governing ethic of gentle personalism as espoused by Peter Maurin, contributed to the success of the anarchist-based movement beyond the death of the founders.

Aim and Purpose

The Catholic Worker movement pursues three objectives: hospitality to those in need (food, clothing, and shelter), advocacy against social injustices, and the publication of newspapers.29 These three tasks have given purpose and direction to the Catholic Worker movement since Day and Maurin founded it in 1933. From the beginning, the movement has


29 Ibid., 6.
been rooted in the consistent practice of corporeal and spiritual works of mercy. Catholic Workers have made it their mission to provide for the poor and downtrodden through establishing houses of hospitality, staffing soup kitchens, distributing clothing, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and being the voice for those marginalized in society. Harvard Divinity professor, Dan McKanan notes, “Throughout the movement the works of mercy—concrete acts of care for the ‘least of these’—function both as a defining practice and a hermeneutical principle. One cannot claim to be a Catholic Worker unless one is practicing the works of mercy, and for most Workers the works of mercy are not merely a practice but also a way of seeing the world.”

Day wrote the original “Aim and Purpose” statement that appeared first in the January 1939 issue of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper. It was published as part of an ongoing series beginning in 1934 and is still printed in *The Catholic Worker* today:

The aim of the Catholic Worker movement is to live in accordance with the justice and charity of Jesus Christ. Our sources are the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures as handed down in the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, with our inspiration coming from the lives of the Saints, “men and women outstanding in holiness, living witnesses to your unchanging love.”

For the sake of clarification, it is worth noting that unlike the two other movements in this study, Women-Church and base ecclesial communities of Latin America, Maurin and Day’s intent for the Catholic Worker as a decentralized, personalist social movement was not to oppose the hierarchical nature of the institutional church. Day was an institutional Catholic, as was

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Maurin. \(^{32}\) The movement’s primary focus was resistance to the State that allied with modern industrialism and the capitalist system—both of which led to the oppression of the working masses and enslaved them to meaningless employment. Mary Segers clarifies Maurin’s motive for protest: “He was not concerned with criticizing the failings of the institutional church…. His great concern was secularism, the separation of the spiritual from the material and the divorce of Christianity from society, business, and politics.” \(^{33}\) Consequently, the choice of the Catholic Worker movement in this study is its organizational approach to a decentralized network of communities that enabled the integration of the Gospel into the public lives of American Catholics. The Catholic Worker relies on a common set of governing norms, a cohesive sense of community, and a shared mission that roots it in the Christian tradition rather than on the hierarchical structure for its identity and unity.

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\(^{32}\) See “Loyal Daughter of the Church,” in Rosalie G. Riegle, *Dorothy Day: Portraits by Those Who Knew Her* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 93. Brian Terrell, however, argues that while both Day and Maurin were faithful and obedient to the church in holding to its doctrines, even obscure ones, when the hierarchy denied the teaching and example of Jesus, Day and Maurin turned in opposition toward the church’s actions. Terrell concludes, “These two Catholics leave us a rich tradition of faithful dissent.” Brian Terrell, “Dorothy Day, Rebel Catholic: Living in a State of Permanent Dissatisfaction with the Church,” in *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement Centenary Essays*, ed. William J. Thorn, Phillip M. Runkel and Susan Mountin (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001), 145.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 206. The development of contemporary Catholic Worker thought after the death of Dorothy Day has opened up the movement to a new era of protest and activism against unjust practices within the institutional church. Frederick Boehrer speculates that the anarchist expressions residing at the foundation of the movement have allowed the movement to evolve in this direction—as an activist and personalist community that has historically voiced opposition to oppressive social and cultural institutions. Now, in the era after the death of Day, some communities in the movement are redirecting their opposition toward the Catholic Church and are applying the same founding convictions for social activism. Boehrer’s designation is “para-institutional Catholic Workers.” See Boehrer, “Christian Anarchism and the Catholic Worker Movement: Roman Catholic Authority and Identity in the United States,” 191-194. He bases the categories on Eugene Kennedy’s identification of Culture I and II Catholics in Eugene Kennedy, *Today Tomorrow’s Catholics, Yesterday’s Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).
Day and Maurin Meet

Day met Maurin in her apartment in New York City only months before the first publication of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper in the spring of 1933. Day had just returned from covering a Hunger March in Washington, D.C. in December 1932. After the march, she visited the national shrine at The Catholic University of America in Washington to pray for a way to help relieve the suffering of the poor masses. Day had not acted on behalf of the poor as she had in earlier years because, as a recent convert to Catholicism, she did not think she could participate in demonstrations organized by Communists. Having knelt at the altar, she “offered up a special prayer, a prayer which came with tears and with anguish.” Day recounts her desire: “that some way would open up for me to use what talents I possessed for my fellow workers, for the poor.”34 She recalls her first meeting with Maurin: upon returning from New York, “I found Peter Maurin...whose spirit and ideas [would] dominate the rest of my life.”35 In a personal interview with Robert Coles, she paid tribute to Maurin, stating, “Without him I would never have been able to find a way of working that would have satisfied my conscience.... Peter's arrival changed everything, everything.... I finally found a purpose in my life and the teacher I needed.”36

Maurin (1877-1949), born a French peasant, took vows as a young adult with the Christian Brothers. He later joined the Catholic lay movement, Sillon, which shaped his thought in reconciling the Catholic faith, democratic principles, and social reform. Maurin was well read,


35 Ibid.

and he drew extensively from the writings of philosophers and anarchist intellectuals for his ideas of comprehensive social reform. Day recalls, “Peter was influenced in his reading by Kropotkin and Eric Gill, A. J. Penty, Harold Robbins, Belloc and Chesterton. He introduced us to these writers. He preferred the word anarchist to the word-socialist because he believed that nothing was so important as man’s freedom.” Maurin eventually settled in New York City, heralding his message as a street-prophet and living as a vagrant until he met Day.

Day credits Maurin for being the inspiration behind the Catholic Worker movement. As the co-founder, Maurin continually reiterated the message of the movement to Day and others. In *Loaves and Fishes*, she recounts her experience of being indoctrinated by Maurin and drawn into his message: “Slowly, I began to understand what Peter wanted: We were to reach the people by practicing the works of mercy, which meant feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner, sheltering the harborless, and so on…. Voluntary poverty and the works of mercy were the things he stressed above all. This was the core of his message.”

**Maurin’s Three-Point Program**

Maurin’s aim to “build a new society in the shell of the old” incorporated a three-point program consisting of roundtable discussions for the “clarification of thought,” opening of Houses of Hospitality in which to practice the works of mercy, and establishing agronomic universities or farming communes to train others in subsistence farming. The program put into practice such values of simplicity, nonviolence, voluntary poverty, decentralized economics,

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personal responsibility, a labor ethic, and the honoring the dignity of each human being. Marc Ellis comments on the idealism of Maurin’s program for social change: “Maurin’s ideas seem idealistic, even simplistic; yet on another level they are almost prophetic. To an urban-industrial society in the midst of depression Maurin proposed embracing a village economy, where crafts, farming, and a personal way of life could be established…. Maurin’s vision was to live in harmony with others, to share what manual and intellectual labor produce.”

Maurin articulated the principles of his ideology often using what he called “Easy Essays,” poetic forms of indoctrination that were easily remembered and recited. The central tenets of the Catholic Worker’s three-point program are in the following easy essay written in 1935:

“What the Catholic Worker Believes”

The Catholic Worker believes
in the gentle personalism
of traditional Catholicism.
The Catholic Worker believes
in the personal obligation
of looking after
the needs of our brother.
The Catholic Worker believes
in the daily practice
of the Works of Mercy.
The Catholic Worker believes
in Houses of Hospitality
for the immediate relief
of those who are in need.
The Catholic Worker believes
in the establishment
of farming communes
where each one works
according to his capacity
and gets according to his need.

The Catholic Worker believes in creating a new society within the shell of the old with the philosophy of the new.\(^\text{40}\)

Day writes, “It was a long time before I really knew what Peter was talking about that first day. But he did make three points I thought I understood: founding a newspaper for clarification of thought, starting houses of hospitality, and organizing farming communes. I did not really think then of the latter two as having anything to do with me, but I did know about newspapers.”\(^\text{41}\) With a family background in the journalism trade and vocational experience as a newspaper journalist, Day was drawn to Maurin’s program from the beginning and she put it into motion almost immediately.

Less than five months after her first meeting with Peter Maurin, Day, along with several other writers, issued the first copy of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper on May 1, 1933. Sold on the streets of Union Square in New York City for “a penny a copy,” the newspaper served to disseminate the message of the Catholic Worker broadly and quickly; the circulation swelled to 150,000 in several years. Day writes of her role in the success of the newspaper: “We are called, we have a vocation, we have a talent. It is up to us to develop that. Mine, for instance, is journalism writing, and it is only because of the paper, *The Catholic Worker*, that Houses of Hospitality and farming communes, or even the suggestion of them came into being.”\(^\text{42}\)


FACTORS IN THE EMERGENCE OF THE CATHOLIC WORKER MOVEMENT

First Contextual Factor: Papal Encyclicals and Catholic Social Teaching

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Catholic Church addressed social injustices caused by the rise of a modern industrial society through two primary papal encyclicals. Pope Leo XIII is credited with establishing the Catholic Social Teaching through the promulgation of the papal encyclical *Rerum novarum* (On the Condition of Workers) in 1891. The “hardheartedness of employers and the greed of unchecked competition” in industrialized countries\(^{43}\) led to the exploitation of the poor worker; therefore, a “remedy must be found quickly for the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class.”\(^{44}\) Leaning on a neo-Thomist approach, the encyclical was the basis of European Catholic social thought in the early twentieth century that established the theological grounds for the rights and dignity of the laborer. Leo XIII’s encyclical called for employers to take measures to improve worker conditions such as safe working environment, fair employee practices, sustainable working hours, and adequate wages to support a family. In addition, the encyclical addressed the responsibilities that the church and public authority or law hold over such social matters, as well as exhorted Catholics to become involved in public life as agents of social change.

*Rerum novarum* was not as well received among Catholics in the United States. Mel Piehl suggests that American Catholic intellectuals were not as interested in appeals to a social program theologically grounded in Thomistic natural law, mostly due to the pervasiveness of

\[^{43}\textit{Rerum novarum}, 3, \text{http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html (accessed December 6, 2015).}\]

\[^{44}\text{Ibid.}\]
Protestant and Enlightenment thought in American culture. He concludes, “While Catholicism was in fact involved in many kinds of social concern, it appeared to many American Catholics and non-Catholics alike to be, as with fundamentalist Protestantism, a religion largely without social consequences outside the realms of personal and sexual morality.”

By the 1930s, interest in a social program was at the forefront of the minds of the American people as the consequences of economic collapse plagued the country. Piehl notes that as American institutions faced criticism and the American people searched for remedies to the social ills, there was a resurgent interest in European Catholic social thought. Consequently, when the papal encyclical *Quadragesimo anno* (Forty Years After) was issued in 1931 by Pope Pius XI, unlike the poor reception of *Rerum novarum* “it was received with enthusiasm by American Catholics.” The papal encyclicals laid the foundation of Catholic social teaching and served to facilitate a religious-based response to the dire social conditions of the time.

Social commentators locate the Catholic Worker as a major social innovation, a “‘third way’—somewhere between communism and capitalism—combining the practical radicalism of the often-atheistic left with many of the orthodox spiritual traditions of Catholicism, the first expression of what would become the political radicalism of the 1960s.” Day writes to her readers in the first issue of *The Catholic Worker* that the church has a social program and is concerned for their material needs as much as their spiritual needs:

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46 Ibid., 53.

To Our Readers

For those who are sitting on park benches in the warm spring sunlight.
For those who are huddling in the shelters trying to escape the rain.
For those who are walking in the streets in the all but futile search for work.
For those who think that there is no hope for the future, no recognition for their plight—this little paper is addressed.

It is printed to call their attention to the fact that the Catholic Church has a social program—to let them know that there are men of God who are working not only for their spiritual, but for their material welfare.48

The Dissemination of Catholic Social Teaching

Maurin was motivated to indoctrinate Catholics on the papal encyclicals because “they rebuke[d] the greed of unrestrained capitalism, encourage[d] labor unions, and in general put the interests of the worker above the interest of private property.”49 Because of the pressing need for an accessible and concrete Catholic social program in the Depression era, the movement emerged as a major proponent of the Leftist perspective in American social critique.50 Piehl hails the Catholic Worker as the first formidable expression of American Catholic radicalism, one that would be much more than a social or political movement because it would significantly draw from its religious roots. He writes,

[any strictly political assessment of the Catholic Worker’s outlook is useless if it does not take into account the dominant feature of the Catholic Worker’s social perspective: its attempt to link the spiritual values of the Christian gospel to the public or political sphere. Unlike secular social movements, which look to human action alone to improve the

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48 Dorothy Day, A Penny a Copy, 3.


50 Robert Trawick, “Dorothy Day and the Social Gospel Movement: Different Theologies, Common Concerns,” Gender and the Social Gospel (2003): 148. Trawick discusses Day’s place among contemporaries in the Social Gospel movement. He concludes, “There is no need to co-opt Day’s work as social gospel. It remains a unique social vision in American religious history. Deeply Catholic...”; “That she stands in importance alongside of Rauschenbusch, Gladden, and the social tradition is undeniable.... But she remains distinct from the social gospel tradition in both theological emphasis and method, if nevertheless showing great sympathy for many of its goals.”
human condition, the Worker has practiced a “religious politics” that see the gospel itself as key to social betterment.\textsuperscript{51}

The message of social justice in the papal encyclicals was instrumental in informing Catholics of their call to social action. Maurin was aware of a vast number who had no knowledge of the encyclicals and the church’s social teaching—including Day, a recent convert to Catholicism. She was the first of many indoctrinated by Maurin:

As a part of what he called her “Catholic education,” Peter introduced Dorothy to the papal encyclicals Rerum novarum and Quadragesimo anno, great documents of the social teaching of the church that, in response to terrible working conditions and child labor in industrialized countries in the nineteenth century, emphasized the dignity of labor and insisted that employers treat workers more justly. Aware that relatively few Catholics had read the encyclicals, Peter said he wanted to make the encyclicals “click.”\textsuperscript{52}

Having been a Catholic for only four years, Day was drawn to Peter’s instruction. Unlike Maurin who persisted in spreading the ideology behind the work, Day held a greater inclination for doing the work:

He was constantly teaching those “easy essays” of his…. He got a bit impatient with me at times, when he saw me hurrying around, trying to get food for our people to eat, or clothes, and not paying enough attention (he thought) to someone who had come to ask us about The Catholic Worker or ask us about our goals here… “You must be clear as you can; you must help them know what we are trying to do,” he’d say.\textsuperscript{53}

Once schooled in the social teachings of the church, both Maurin and Day “were among the most devoted readers of papal encyclicals on social issues, as well as the distributist writers” who used the newspaper to disseminate the social teaching of the church.\textsuperscript{54}


\textsuperscript{53} Coles, Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion, 114.

\textsuperscript{54} McKanan, The Catholic Worker After Dorothy, 15.
The message of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper quickly reached a large number of readers. Within six months of the first issue, the newspaper’s audience grew from 2,500 to 35,000. Day notes the phenomenon: “By the end of the year we had a circulation of 100,000 and by 1936 it was 150,000. It was certainly a mushroom growth.”\(^{55}\) The paper was distributed not only to individual readers, but was peddled in bulk to parishes, schools, and seminaries. The subscription to the paper, throughout the history of the movement, would rise and fall with the agreement or dissent towards the views reflected in it. Overall, the paper reached tens of thousands of readers, broadcasting widely the mission of the Catholic Worker movement.

In the first issue of *The Catholic Worker*, dated May 1933, Day points to the papal encyclicals to clarify the religious nature of the movement and its roots in Catholic social teaching:

**Filling a Need**

It’s time there was a Catholic paper printed for the unemployed. The fundamental aim of most radical sheets is the conversion of its readers to radicalism and atheism. Is it not possible to be radical and not atheist? Is it not possible to protest, to expose, to complain, to point out abuses and demand reforms without desiring the overthrow of religion? In an attempt to popularize and make known the encyclicals of the Popes in regard to social justice and the program put forth by the Church for the “reconstruction of the social order,” this news sheet, *The Catholic Worker*, is started.\(^{56}\)

Besides the distribution of the newspaper, the message of *The Catholic Worker* and a vision of social reform were disseminated widely through various communication efforts of Maurin and Day. Teaching the central tenets of the Catholic Worker was important to Maurin; he was persistent in taking every opportunity to indoctrinate others into the Catholic Worker

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ideology. Day writes, “What struck me first about him was that he was one of those people who talked you deaf, dumb and blind, who each time he saw you began his conversation just where he had left off at the previous meeting, and never stopped unless you begged for rest, and that was not for long. He was irrepressible and he was incapable of taking offense.” His persistence spilled over into the public sphere, to demand the attention of anyone who would listen: “Peter used to enter upon discussions on street corners, over restaurant tables, in public squares, as well as in the office, at all times of the day and night. He believed in catching people as they came, and often the discussions would go on all night.”

Another effective vehicle for spreading the message of the Catholic Worker was “Clarification of Thought” events, weekly public meetings around a topic of interest to the Worker community. They became one of the central features of the Catholic Worker movement and continue today in most communities. Day writes, “We have regular Friday night meetings, when speakers come and present a point of view, lead in a discussion, or give a spiritual conference. There are discussions when visitors gather together, and whole groups, classes from seminaries, colleges and schools come together to ask questions and to enter into controversy.” In the early days, Maurin used these times to indoctrinate others into a solid philosophical and theological foundation for the movement and disseminating the principles of the Catholic Worker movement.

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Equally important was the impact of Day’s speaking tours across the country. The speaking engagements helped in spreading the ideas of the Catholic Worker movement, particularly among young people. Speaking to college students on campuses was often a part of Day’s itinerary: “Today, as I write, it is a sunny winter morning. I have just returned from a speaking trip to Notre Dame, Immaculata High School and adjoining Marygrove College in Detroit, Wayne State, and other colleges in the Midwest.”60 Maurin and Day perceived themselves “as Pauline evangelists, eager to urge the virtues of their kind of Biblical communitarianism upon as many people as the written or spoken word could reach.”61

Second Contextual Factor: The Great Depression

The oppressive economic conditions of American life in the early 1930s were a significant factor in the emergence of the Catholic Worker. Unemployment in 1933 had affected a third of the work force, and in poorer areas of the country it approached fifty percent; breadlines and homelessness were a common sight across the nation. As many as forty percent of the nation’s farms were up for auction, local governments were verging on bankruptcy, and some cities had significant reductions in police, firemen, and public school staffing in order to fund relief programs for their citizens.62

The impact of the Great Depression and the disastrous economic consequences that fell upon the country intensified Day’s desire to respond to the physical needs of the poor. Piehl notes the effect the Depression era had on the emergence of the Catholic Worker, but also notes

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60 Day, Loaves and Fishes, 211.

61 Coles, Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion, 120.

the significant role the movement played in the emergence of religious radicalism that was set in motion decades before. For Catholics unfamiliar with Maurin’s anti-capitalist campaign and the movement’s radical Gospel demands, the actions of the Catholic Worker were perceived as a Catholic social response to the severe economic conditions and a concrete response that aligned with the social recovery agenda of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal.63

In any case, Day’s conviction to address the immediate needs of the poor in the streets of New York City played a crucial role in both her and Maurin’s urgency to establish the Catholic Worker program. In Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker, Nancy L. Roberts describes the crowds that gathered at Union Square in New York City on May 1, 1933. Day and three young men sold the first edition of The Catholic Worker. Roberts depicts the tangible impact of the economic collapse experienced during Depression in Union Square that day:

President Franklin Roosevelt has recently launched his “Hundred Days” emergency legislation to battle the Great Depression…. There, May Day dawned balmy and bright on 50,000 leftists who gathered to hear speeches denouncing Hitler’s fascism and advocating for revolutionary social change…. Seared in the minds of those in the crowd were memories of the previous winter; a season of nearly unmitigated despair. The Depression’s lean fingers had at last gripped most Americans. Thousands of farms were foreclosed, and angry farmers dumped milk along the roadways rather than accept prices for it which did not cover transportation costs to processing plants. On the outskirts of cities, many without homes fashioned shelters of wooden crates, tar paper, old car bodies, or anything else they could glean. Private charity and state and local welfare councils had exhausted their resources. The jobless felt they had nowhere to turn. Would Roosevelt’s New Deal stem the tide of the republic’s gravest economic crisis?64

Day’s conviction to engage in social activism on behalf of the poor significantly marked her life prior to her conversion to Catholicism. Day was exasperated by the church’s lack of a concrete mechanism in which she, as a layperson, could put her faith to work on behalf of the

63 Piehl, Breaking Bread, 113-115.

poor. She recounted her experience during the Depression years, seeing the hungry standing in the streets begging “with a look of sadness in their faces that made [her] want to cry.”\textsuperscript{65} She saw the hypocrisy of the wealthy laity of the church, who lived comfortably while the poor suffered. “Then I would see well-dressed people coming out of Manhattan churches, with their furs and their English-style suits and overcoats and their shoes shined and their heads lifted high: as complacent as could be in their conviction that God was theirs—that an hour at Mass on Sunday had put Him in their corner.”\textsuperscript{66} In an interview with Robert Coles, Day gave a sharp critique of the church being culpable in its neglect of caring for material needs of the poor:

I got angrier and angrier at what I saw. I wanted the churches to open their doors, to let the poor and the hungry and the homeless come inside, to feed them, to give them shelter. I wanted all the gold and the furs, all the fancy jewels worn by the princes of the church, the prelates—all that to be sold, so men and women and children could get a meal and not shiver and get sick on the streets, with no place to go…. I wanted to be out there helping in some concrete way, and I was being told in sermons that atheistic communism was the worst possible thing, and all right, I said to myself, I can understand the Church standing up to communists who want to destroy it — I knew their arrogance — but how about the church living up to its own founder’s life, which wasn’t the life of a Henry Ford or a J. P. Morgan?\textsuperscript{67}

Day admits that later she became aware of priests who voluntarily took a life of poverty and willingly gave up much of their lives for the poor. She eventually embraced a more gracious posture towards the church, letting go of the idyllic expectations of the church’s perfect obedience to the words of Christ. Day found reassurance in the words of Romano Guardini, German priest and theologian, who said, “The Church is the Cross on which Christ was crucified.” While it allowed Day to put into perspective the church’s failures, the impact of the

\textsuperscript{65} Coles, \textit{Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion}, 67.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 67-68.
church turning a blind eye to the poor during the Depression era was consequential in the emergence of the Catholic Worker movement.

**Third Contextual Factor: Lay-Initiated Social Program to Integrate Faith and Public Life**

The social encyclicals, which laid out the theological grounds of the church’s social teaching, exhorted Catholics to become involved in public life as agents of social change. Sociologist Michele Theresa Aronica identifies the gap between the church’s teaching to live out one’s faith in the public sphere juxtaposed to “how these principles should be translated into a concrete program for the renewal of society.” 68 The church needed a “viable mechanism through which Church teachings could be integrated within the fabric of society by means of teaching, organizing and directing the laity.” 69

In the pre-Vatican period, “Pope Pius XI (d. 1939) desired that Catholic Action ideally involve the organized participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy.” 70 Effectively, the bishops and priests were to direct the work of the church’s social mission, and the laity were to follow the lead of the hierarchy in bringing the spiritual to the public sphere. “The Church primarily influences the public and temporal world via the layperson, who is at the same time a Christian and a citizen.” 71 This would assume that the hierarchy had adequate training in seminary in the intersection of Catholic social teaching and public witness in order to be able to lead the laity in works of social action.

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69 Ibid.


71 Ibid.
Day’s desire was to live out her faith and to be an instrument of social change, yet she did not see how the Catholic Church was supportive of the laity in engaging in action on behalf of the poor. While watching the hunger strikers march in Washington D.C., Day experienced a surge of conviction to join in solidarity with the strikers, yet felt unable to join because of her conversion to the Catholic faith. She heard priests criticized communists for their lack of belief, yet she knew their commitment: “[communists] were fighting on behalf of the poor, and I was a Catholic and praying for the poor…I wanted to be out there helping in some concrete way.”

Day describes her internal conflict:

I stood on the curb and watched them, joy and pride in the courage of this band of men and women mounting in my heart, and with it a bitterness too that since I was now a Catholic, with fundamental philosophical differences, I could not be out there with them…. Where was the Catholic leadership in the gathering of bands of men and women together, for the actual works of mercy…. I watched my brothers in their struggle, not for themselves but for others. How our dear Lord must love them, I kept thinking to myself. They were His friends, His comrades, and who knows how close to His heart in their attempt to work for justice.

In addition, while Maurin promoted the papal encyclicals, he made his criticism apparent of the church’s lack of mobilizing the laity as social agents. *Quadragesimo anno*, from Maurin’s perspective, was “more organizational in [its] approach and did not uphold the ideal of personal responsibility.”

For Maurin, more organization meant more programming and, consequently, less actual assistance to those in need. He understood the potential of the Gospel message to bring social transformation yet felt as though the Catholic Church and its leaders had made it effectively impotent by “treating theology and the social teaching of the church as if they

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72 Coles, *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion*, 68.


74 Ellis, “Peter Maurin,” 28.
constitute two separate fields of inquiry, separating the natural and the supernatural, theology and the social sphere.”\textsuperscript{75} Maurin conveys his view in an easy essay entitled, “Blowing the Dynamite”:

Writing about the Catholic Church, a radical writer says:

Rome will have to do more than to play a waiting game; She will have to use some of the dynamite inherent in her message. To blow the dynamite of a message is the only way to make the message dynamic. If the Catholic Church is not today the dominant social force, it is because Catholic scholars have failed to blow the dynamite of the Church. Catholic scholars have taken the dynamite of the Church, have wrapped it up in nice phraseology, placed it in a hermetic container and sat on the lid. It is about time to blow the lid off so the Catholic Church may again become the dominant social dynamic force.\textsuperscript{76}

The Catholic Worker movement was a concrete social program, initiated and directed by laity. “The Worker was a group of individual Catholics involved in lay action and they were not part of Catholic Action under the hierarchy.”\textsuperscript{77} Taking personal responsibility and initiative as

\textsuperscript{75} Zwick and Zwick, \textit{The Catholic Worker Movement}, 13.

\textsuperscript{76} Peter Maurin, \textit{A Penny a Copy}, 11-12.

\textsuperscript{77} Curran, \textit{The Social Mission}, 27.
agents of social change and putting into practice the church’s social teaching, Day and Maurin exercised the “tremendous freedom there is in the Church, a freedom most cradle Catholics do not seem to know they possess.”78 As a social movement, the Catholic Worker led the way by example—albeit a radical example—in bringing alignment between the church’s social teachings, individual commitment to Gospel ideals, and the social realities of early twentieth century American life for Catholic laity. In effect, the Catholic Worker, as a radical religious lay movement, brought into sharp focus the responsibility the laity have in initiating the integration of their faith and public life.

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION AND PERSONALIST PHILOSOPHY

The Catholic Worker’s “hearty ideological stew” was less an abstract social vision than an active personalist community. Maurin and Day developed an anarchist-informed social vision from a synthesis of diverse schools of intellectual thought, weaving anarchist principles with personalist practices. They were influenced by the writings of various contemporary anarchists: Russian author Leo Tolstoy and Russian naturalist and anarchist Peter Kropotkin were the most influential.79 According to Piehl, the founders’ strategy was that “Dorothy Day had blended her free-style American anarchism with Peter Maurin’s peasant communalism (which he preferred to call personalism rather than anarchism) to produce the basic stock of the Catholic Worker’s hearty ideological stew.”80 Mary Segers agrees, noting the marriage of the political, social, and


79 Frederick G. III Boehrer, “Christian Anarchism and the Catholic Worker Movement: Roman Catholic Authority and Identity in the United States” (PhD dissertation, Syracuse University, 2001), 23-33. Boehrer gives an extensive overview of the influential anarchist writers and the impact their thought had on Maurin and Day’s adaptation of Christian anarchism.

economic thread in the movement: “[The Catholic Worker] is an American phenomenon and therefore stresses liberty and equality. But the personalism underlying the movement accounts for its social and economic doctrines which are to a great extent anarchist and socialistic.”

Through practicing the philosophy of personalism, Maurin sought to balance the socio-political tension between capitalism and communism and to correct the imbalance of an overemphasis of the individual on one hand, and the neglect of the individual through collectivism on the other. The American ideal of “rugged individualism” was not suited for the human person, who was a socially conscious and cooperative being. Maurin, however, was concerned for the individual: “[He] was preoccupied with the size, complexity, and impersonality of modern life and was especially critical of systems of mass production which brutalized men. He feared that as long as men accepted the assembly line and the abundance of the factory system, they would not think in terms of personality or community.” The dignity of the human being is rooted in the principle that each person is created in the image of God, which is the cornerstone of Catholic social teaching.

Under the tenets of a personalist approach, each person is to “act on their own initiative for the common good, respecting the dignity of each individual.” Maurin conveys this notion in an easy essay:

According to St. Thomas Aquinas
man is more
than an individual

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82 Ibid., 207.

83 Maurin and Day were influenced by the writings of Emmanuel Mounier who, as a philosopher of Christian personalist thought, noted the tension between the value of every human being made in the image of God with the rights of the individual. Zwick and Zwick, *The Catholic Worker Movement*, 98-99.

with individual rights;
he is a person
with personal duties
toward God,
himself,
and his fellow man.
As a person
man cannot serve God
without serving
the common good.85

Christian Sources of Anarchist Expressions in the Catholic Worker Movement

A blend of anarchist philosophy and Christian principles accounts for the formation of the Catholic Worker as a personalist social movement. Author and founder of the Catholic Worker Emmaus House, Frederick Boehrer identifies five Catholic and Christian sources that informed anarchist threads in the founding ideology of the Catholic Worker movement: the principal of subsidiarity, primacy of conscience, Christian nonviolence, the Scriptures, and Christian personalism.86 For the purposes of this project and the focus on the impact of anarchist principles on the movement’s decentralized structure, three of those sources will be explored more fully in this section: the Scriptures, Christian Personalism, and localism as a subset of the principle of subsidiarity. The subsection on the Christian Scriptures is a brief overview of their influence in the development of the anarchist expression of the Catholic Worker. Developed in the following section is the impact of Scripture upon the movement under Haight’s first criteria for ecclesial structures, the movement’s capacity to embody the life and ministry of Jesus.

Christian Scriptures

Robert Coles records the formative place Christian Scriptures held in Day’s life:

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85 Maurin, Catholic Radicalism, 31.
86 Boehrer, “Christian Anarchism and the Catholic Worker,” 22.
In her intimate life with the Bible, certain figures stand out: Saint Paul and his evocation of the absurdity of Christian thinking, its way of overturning conventional assumptions, and such Hebrew prophets as Jeremiah and Isaiah and Amos. It is too easy, perhaps, for those in the secular world who admire her to overlook this intense biblical side of her intellectual life. We are intrigued by her political and social views but miss the extent of her interest in, say, Therese of Lisieux or John of the Cross. She knew what effect her preoccupations could have.\(^{87}\)

The Hebrew and Greek Scriptures provided a religious foundation in the ideology of the Catholic Worker movement as stated in the “Aims and Means.” The texts primarily focused on the life of Christ, his teachings, and his public ministry as found in the New Testament; they were formative for Day and Maurin in establishing the Catholic Worker as a religious social movement. Mary Segers, writing on the political and social ideology of the Catholic Worker, notes, “The central tenets of Christianity as stated in the New Testament provide a set of core beliefs, and the movement then proceeds to draw out the social and political implications of the Christian Gospels.”\(^{88}\) Specifically, Day emphasized the gospel accounts of the Good Samaritan, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25 as ideals for the Catholic Worker lifestyle. Zwick writes, “Dorothy spent her life putting flesh on the bones of Matthew 25. If there ever was a mission statement of the Catholic Worker movement, this was it.”\(^{89}\)

Boehrer clarifies the role of Scripture, citing the Sermon on the Mount, as the most influential passage on the practical expressions of anarchism in the Catholic Worker movement. For Maurin, the Sermon on the Mount was the blueprint for a new society. It established a

\(^{87}\) Coles, Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion, 141.


\(^{89}\) Zwick and Zwick, The Catholic Worker Movement, 31.
standard of values that reversed worldly values of accumulation, power, and self-interest. Maurin writes an easy essay suggesting the reorientation of society according to an alternative standard:

When the banker has the power
the Sermon on the Mount
is declared impractical.
When the banker has the power
we have an acquisitive society.
When the Sermon on the Mount
is the standard of values
then Christ is the Leader…
When Christ is the Leader
we have a functional,
not an acquisitive society.⁹⁰

Boehrer points again to the Sermon on the Mount for having informed Day and Maurin’s pacifist position and practices of non-violence and radical love “which they see as contrary to the coercive elements of political, economic, and military institutions.”⁹¹ Day draws from the sermon to reify her pacifist position: “Our manifesto is the Sermon on the Mount.”⁹²

**Christian Personalism**

Day reflects on the importance of the practice of personalism in daily tasks at the Catholic Worker:

But for me the heart of our work is just that, the daily pastoral responsibilities: making the soup and serving it, trying to help someone get to the hospital who otherwise might not get there…. There are days when all morning has been taken up with cutting up vegetables and all afternoon has been taken up with trying to arrange for someone to see a doctor and then sitting with that person in the outpatient department.⁹³

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⁹¹ Boehrer, “Christian Anarchism and the Catholic Worker,” 53.


⁹³ Coles, *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion*, 102.
In a 1980 study, sociologist Harry Murray identified four variations in which the Catholic Worker movement has used the term “personalism.” Based on European personalist writers such as Emmanuel Mounier and Nicholas Berdyaev, the first understanding of personalism is a respect for the value of the individual person over any material goods, systems, laws, or legislation. Second, and most common, is the understanding of taking personal responsibility for another. This includes both taking personal responsibility for the needs of others as well as granting others the freedom to choose or not to choose assuming responsibility. Third is the personal engagement of another person in one’s immediate presence. For example, a guest in the Catholic Worker is not merely another hungry homeless person to feed, but he or she has a name and is worthy of a Worker’s personal attention while being served. An implication to this third understanding is that a person is addressed based on his or her individual needs. Murray states that personalism assumes “individualized attention in somewhat the same sense as is meant in ‘individualized education’—tailoring one’s response to the individual need of the other.”

Fourth and final, personalism intends to promote social change. When one person is being served, both the person and society as a whole are transformed.

Maurin’s personalist approach, which he called “gentle personalism,” served to reinforce the anarchist expressions of the Catholic Worker movement. “Underlying all of Maurin’s ideas was a strong emphasis on the importance and value of the human being, personal action, and personal responsibility.” Maurin believed that personal action should come at a cost. “It was

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94 Murray, Do Not Neglect Hospitality, 212-215. Murray reports that the use of the term in the early writings of the Catholic Worker matches the meaning in the latter years of the movement.

95 Ibid., 215.

the impersonal charity of ‘Holy Mother the State,’ [Maurin and Day] believed, that perpetuated an unjust status quo, while the practice of caring for the poor ‘at a personal cost’ had the potential to create an entirely new community.”\(^97\) In an easy essay entitled “Feeding the Poor,” Maurin captured the principal:

> In the first centuries of Christianity
> the poor were fed, clothed, and sheltered
> at a personal sacrifice,
> the naked were clothed
> at a personal sacrifice,
> the homeless were sheltered
> at a personal sacrifice.
> And because the poor
> were fed, clothed, and sheltered
> at a personal sacrifice,
> the pagans used to say
> about the Christians
> “See how they love each other.”
> In our own day
> the poor are no longer
> fed, clothed and sheltered
> at a personal sacrifice
> but at the expense
> of the taxpayers.
> And because the poor
> are no longer
> fed, clothed and sheltered
> at a personal sacrifice
> the pagans say about the Christians
> “See how they pass the buck.”\(^98\)

Boehrer summarizes the practical outcome of a movement founded on personalism. He states, “The exercise of personal freedom resulted in giving more importance to individual social action rather than impersonal, highly-organized large-scale efforts. The result is an inclination

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\(^97\) McKanan, *The Catholic Worker After Dorothy*, 9.

\(^98\) Peter Maurin, *A Penny a Copy*, 11.
towards anarchism.”\textsuperscript{99} For the Catholic Worker established in the tradition of the church’s social teaching, this meant that the principle of personalism embodies the daily practice of the works of mercy. “The works of mercy, performed at an individual level, will provide the proper response to those ‘least’ in our world. In the Catholic Worker movement, the practice of personalism, not government bureaucracy, will be the ‘ultimate criteria.’”\textsuperscript{100}

\textit{Principle of Subsidiarity, or Localism as Primacy of Place}

The principle of subsidiarity was first introduced into Catholic social teaching in the 1931 papal encyclical \textit{Quadragesimo Anno}:

The supreme authority of the State ought, therefore, to let subordinate groups handle matters and concerns of lesser importance, which would otherwise dissipate its efforts greatly. Thereby the State will more freely, powerfully, and effectively do all those things that belong to it alone because it alone can do them: directing, watching, urging, restraining, as occasion requires and necessity demands. Therefore, those in power should be sure that the more perfectly a graduated order is kept among the various associations, in observance of the principle of “subsidiary function,” the stronger social authority and effectiveness will be the happier and more prosperous the condition of the State.\textsuperscript{101}

Implementation of the principle of subsidiarity places the rights and responsibility for decision-making closest to the community that is able to handle it and that is affected by the consequences of that decision. The role of the larger governing body acts cooperatively, in mutual responsibility to the smaller deciding bodies.

The anarchist foundation of the Catholic Worker was the practical implementation of the principle of subsidiarity. According to Boehrer, however, “Maurin speaks of subsidiarity in terms of personalism and decentralism, words he preferred to the controversial and frequently

\textsuperscript{99} Boehrer, “Christian Anarchism and the Catholic Worker Movement,” 55.

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 58.

\textsuperscript{101} Quadragesimo Anno, 80; http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno.html (accessed Oct 10, 2015).
misunderstood ‘anarchism.’”102 Day boasts of the movement’s implementation of these principles in her 1949 article entitled, “The Scandal of the Works of Mercy.” She writes, “[A]narchists that we are, we want to decentralize everything and delegate to smaller bodies and groups what can be done far more humanly and responsibly through mutual aid, as well as charity, through Blue Cross, Red Cross, union cooperation, parish cooperation.”103

For Maurin and Day, the principle of subsidiarity was essential in sustaining human and social systems based on a Christian personalist approach. Day associates the principle of subsidiarity with the scriptural demand to care for one’s neighbor: “We are taught in the Gospel to work from the bottom up, not from the top down. Everything was personalist, we were our brothers’ keepers, and we were not to pass our neighbor who was fallen by the wayside and let the State, the all-encroaching State, take over, but were to do all we could ourselves. These were the anarchist and pacifist teachings Peter Maurin, our founder, taught us.”104 In addition, the concept of localism as the daily concern for one’s immediate neighbor is best understood within the principle of subsidiarity. Localism, essential to Catholic Worker thought, forges the sense of primacy of place or presence in the anarchist expression of the Catholic Worker movement. Day clarifies her view in an interview with Robert Coles: “If I had to be very brief about what localism means, I would say it means a neighborliness that is both political and spiritual in nature.”105

102 Boehrer, “Christian Anarchism and the Catholic Worker Movement,” 35-36.


105 Coles, Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion, 103.
For Day, localism in the Catholic Worker’s mission was found in the practice of “neighborliness.” The House of Hospitality marked the geographical hub in which the Worker community practiced works of mercy in immediate proximity to the poor. Each person is indeed his or her “brother’s keeper”—the brother or sister one encounters routinely and whose needs can be addressed in tangible ways. Day writes of tending to one’s neighbor:

And what is the work but to love God and our neighbor, to show our love for God by our love for our neighbor. When Jesus was asked who was our neighbor He told the story of the Good Samaritan. When He pictured the last judgment he listed the corporeal works of mercy. The recent Popes have called for participation of the laity in the work of the hierarchy and the work of the hierarchy that Jesus stressed was “Feed My Sheep”.\(^{106}\)

Moreover, localism is what ties one to an actual community and fosters a deeper sense of a shared mission within the community. Day responds to Robert Coles’ question, “You ask about localism, Why Localism? I think my answer is that for some of us anything else is extravagant; it’s unreal; it’s not a life we want to live.”\(^{107}\) Day turns to Simone Weil, French philosopher and political activist, to comment on the value of the local community:

Weil saw that people wanted to feel connected to one another…. She believed that the dignity of individuals would be affirmed by local associations, by participation in meetings in which people can affirm one another face to face. Simone Weil argued for small, lively associations of neighborhoods, for the revival of the ancient meaning of the polis: villages, provinces, and regions which would have a continuing place…. She envisioned daily ties, actively forged and strengthened by families involved with families, workers with workers, that would add up to a people’s rootedness.\(^{108}\)

In summary, the philosophical thread of anarchism woven throughout the movement is rooted in several Christian sources, including the Scriptures, Christian Personalism, and localism.

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\(^{107}\) Coles, *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion*, 105.

\(^{108}\) Ibid., 107.
As a subset of the principle of subsidiarity. These factors play an important role in the “non-structure” governing ethic of the Catholic Worker, as will be seen in the analysis in later chapters.

Organism not Organization: The Non-Structure of the Catholic Worker

For almost ninety years, the Catholic Worker movement has maintained its non-structured identity as a personalist lay movement committed to practicing the works of mercy. Atypical of a movement after the death of a charismatic founder, the Catholic Worker has thrived, not losing the momentum and vitality of its founding years.109 Dan McKanan, in The Catholic Worker after Dorothy, reports on the long-term sustainability of the movement after the death of the founders. He writes, “Some observers have marveled at the movement’s avoidance of the process of bureaucratization that Max Weber saw as the inevitable fate of new religious movements after the death of a charismatic leader. But the more remarkable fact is that it has not simply disintegrated into hundreds of local houses and farms, without any sense of connection to a larger movement.”110 Moreover, no one individual or specific Catholic Worker house, including St. Joseph House the founding house, assumed a leadership role over the movement after the death of Day in 1980. Nevertheless, the success of the Catholic Worker did not wane as “so many individuals and communities took personal responsibility for some of the tasks needed to sustain a vital movement, there was no need for a central leader or bureaucratic structure to take charge of all those tasks.”111 The typical requirement for continuity of strong leadership

109 Boehrer expounds on this point in his doctoral thesis, “Christian Anarchism and the Catholic Worker Movement.”

110 McKanan, The Catholic Worker After Dorothy, 22.

111 Ibid., 28.
through a centralized organization gave way to the mode of collaborative, personalist responsibility, sustaining the vitality of the network of Catholic Worker communities.

Maurin and Day never intended the movement to develop into an institution or organization. Rather, the founders conceptualized the Catholic Worker as an “organism” that developed organically and whose success was day-to-day in the doing the works of mercy. McKanan reports, “In the last years of its founder’s life, the Catholic Worker movement became what Dorothy Day has always said it was: an organism rather than an organization. And as such it has endured.” Success of the Catholic Worker for Day was not a long-term goal; success was simply engaging in the works of mercy each day and taking personal responsibility for the person in need. “The key to the survival of Catholic Workers, despite failures to stop wars and injustice, is their rootedness in the daily practice of the Works of Mercy.”

Intra-Network Anarchism

The Catholic Worker established itself as a network of relationships that was “governed” by personalist principles. According to Boehrer, “Lacking a corporate structure, the Catholic Worker was woven together by an anarchist thread.” The anarchism within the Catholic Worker is evident on three organizational levels: 1) as a movement in opposition to the State and its involvement in social reform, 2) as an anarchist community of the local house of hospitality, and 3) as a social movement that developed into a network of anarchist communities.

112 Ibid.

113 Zwick and Zwick, The Catholic Worker Movement, 314.

The founding communities of Day and Maurin in New York City, St. Joseph’s and Maryhouse, expanded as a “personalist-based social movement” into a network of communities across the country and was bound by the mission to do the works of mercy among the poor. “While Day and Maurin were co-founders of the Catholic Worker, they had established no formal policies on how to practice Christian personalism.” Subsequent Catholic Worker communities functioned autonomously from the founders’ house. In addition, neither Day nor Maurin while alive took a leadership in overseeing the other houses in the network, though they were understood as authority figures in the movement by others. Even in the case of interpersonal conflict and differing views in the communities, when Day’s leadership was sought she refrained from decision-making for another Worker House. Boehrer writes, “[E]ach community, as part of this anarchist movement, exercised its own decision-making.” The lack of centralized structure continues to define the movement today. “[E]ach community cooperatively assesses its own needs in light of members’ strengths and limitations, decides just how it will live out the works of mercy, builds its own network of local supporters, discerns how it can practice the Worker tradition of living in voluntary poverty, starts its own newsletter or newspaper, and survives by its own capacity to raise funds and recruit volunteers.”

Anarchism can be identified at a third level. Boehrer suggests that “[t]his expression of anarchism may be described as the relationship among the different Catholic Worker communities with each other, ultimately forming what is referred to as the ‘movement.’ This is

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115 Boehrer, “Christian Anarchism and the Catholic Worker,” 134.
116 Ibid.
anarchism functioning on a macro-level.” The consequence of a network of decentralized communities and fostering horizontal relationships between them has contributed to sustaining the movement before and after Day’s death.

**The Dorothy Factor**

What held the communities together as a personalist social movement? A factor that contributed to the communities’ sense of cohesion as a network was the fostering of relational connections between houses. While Day was alive, she maintained intentional relationships with the other houses through visits and personal letters. After Day’s death, the interrelations between the Workers evolved further, such that in Day’s absence, the relational dynamic between the Workers themselves were strengthened and they became interdependent upon each other for support and encouragement. The ongoing success and sustainability of the Catholic Worker as a social movement, according to McKanan, is the “horizontal development of relations between communities” such that the existence of the Catholic Worker is not dependent upon a single charismatic leader or a single local community. For example, those who desired to start a Catholic Worker community were (and still are) encouraged to tour various houses and learn from the experience of the Worker communities before forging ahead with starting a house on their own. Perhaps more significantly, any existing community can and has turned to another community for encouragement and guidance in tenuous periods of establishing a Catholic Worker house.

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119 McKanan, *The Catholic Worker After Dorothy*, 27.

120 Ibid., 27-28.
In assessing the success of the Catholic Worker as a personalist social movement, one cannot overlook the “Dorothy Factor.” Day played a significant role in creating an ongoing sense of cohesiveness among the Catholic Worker communities; her influence across the network of houses of hospitality was “powerful and constant.”¹²¹ Day functioned in two capacities in the sustainability of the Catholic Worker movement. First, she was a bridge between the communities. The Catholic Worker communities functioned autonomously as decentralized communities, yet Day maintained a degree of interaction and friendship among them. Rather than a sense of rivalry or a competitive spirit, particularly with those who held differing views than Day, she created a sense of collaboration and mutual dependency between the communities. “She modeled a practice of friendship that reached beyond the boundaries of her movement,”¹²² and subsequently, her friendship fostered a significant sense of unity within the movement.

Second, Day served in a mediating role for the Catholic Worker communities. Day’s natural, charismatic leadership allowed her to hold influence across the network as a whole. When differences in opinions occurred and a resolution could not be reached, communities sought her advice because they held her in high esteem as the founder. “In a technical sense, the Catholic Worker lacks organizational structure, hierarchical leadership, and clearly defined rules or policies. But in a practical sense, it was not needed because Day’s influence was tremendous.”¹²³

While the movement functioned autonomously from Day and Maurin, one exception is often noted. In June 1940, as Europe was already engaged in World War II, Day distributed a

¹²² McKanan, The Catholic Worker After Dorothy, 23.
letter to each Catholic Worker house reaffirming the movement’s absolute pacifist position. Though she made it clear in the letter that those who opposed this position could remain associated with the Catholic Worker as long as doing the works of mercy was the mission, some houses closed as a result of her movement-wide declaration, especially after the U.S. entered the war in 1941. Boehrer states, “Some people remember Day as being the benevolent dictator of an anarchist movement. Her decision to emphasize absolute pacifism is often cited to defend this assessment. Clearly, Day’s position as an authority figure in a social movement is complicated.” In Day’s defense, Boehrer comments on the principle behind Day’s unusual mode of a movement-wide decision:

There were quite a number of exchanges among Catholic Workers in New York City with Dorothy about this, and they debated with her. Even in the Chicago’s Catholic Worker community, the debate between Chicago’s community and Dorothy, she was clear in saying this is a “non-negotiable.” She was determining that alone; there was no board, there were no board of directors. There was no voting on this; there was no taking a poll. This was an instance of her saying, more or less: this is who we are. This is part of our identity. Non-violence.

Boehrer continues, commenting on Day’s statement as more of an exception to her normal mode of exercising leadership: “As co-founder, Day exercised her authority, charismatically given to her by many Catholic Workers, to stake out a position on behalf of the entire movement. A rare display of movement-wide unilateral authority, it was the exception, not the rule for this movement.”

Since Day’s death in 1980, Boehrer suggests that the Catholic Worker houses are bereft of a decision-making mechanism for broader issues that have implications on the identity of the

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124 Boehrer, “Christian Anarchism and the Catholic Worker,” 141.

125 Frederick Boehrer, phone interview with author, December 17, 2013.

126 Boehrer, “Christian Anarchism and the Catholic Worker,” 142.
movement. Controversial issues that arise and that often reflect Catholic Worker identity and authority have increasingly challenged the future of the movement.\textsuperscript{127} Cultural and social issues such as feminism, abortion, sexual orientation, organizational status, and the role of technology continue to give rise to strong and opposing opinions within the network of Catholic Worker communities. Without Day, such movement-wide issues of identity trends toward resolutions that are local and independent and that are not universally imposed across the movement. In an effort to bring resolution to concerns of identity, Workers access Day’s writings as authoritative documents and mine them for insights as a method to preserve the original identity of the movement. Boehrer concludes,

Without a movement leader, without the New York community as the focal point of the movement, today’s movement lacks any structure to mediate the various issues that ultimately lead to questioning the very identity and authority of the movement. Insofar as community decisions were once influenced by Day’s presence, today each community is truly on its own in terms of decision making. This leads to a more open form of anarchism as a personalist social movement in today’s Catholic Worker.\textsuperscript{128}

Consequently, while the non-structure of the Catholic Worker has allowed the movement to thrive without the charismatic leadership of Day, issues in a modern society poses ongoing challenges for its capacity to secure a common identity across the anarchist network.

ANCHORED BY HAIGHT’S THREE CRITERIA FOR ECCLESIAL STRUCTURES

Haight’s criteria for ecclesial structures in this section aids in identifying the criteria in which the Catholic Worker movement is anchored to the accounts of the early church and the larger universal church. The non-structure of the movement is indicative of a governing ethic as

\textsuperscript{127} Boehrer, “Diversity, Plurality and Ambiguity,” 108.

\textsuperscript{128} Boehrer, “Christian Anarchism and the Catholic Worker,” 177-178.
found in that of the philosophy of personalism, and as such, will prove to be an important factor for further analysis in chapter five.

**First Norm: Doing the Works of Mercy**

The movement’s mission to do the works of mercy draws on the teaching and ministry of Jesus in Matthew 25. For Catholic Workers, the words of Jesus in the “Parable of the Sheep and the Goats” in Matthew 25 are interpreted literally. It has informed the movement’s conviction to serve the poor, following Jesus’ command to do for the least of these brothers and sisters as one would do in service to him. Doing the works of mercy at a personal cost to the Worker shows the personalist principles undergirding the movement. Boehrer comments, “Instead of ‘passing the buck’ to institutions of the state, the Catholic Workers helped others at a personal sacrifice.”

Day and Maurin understood the works of mercy in the traditional Catholic sense, informed by Aquinas in the Middle Ages as a list of laudable deeds. They included seven corporeal works and seven spiritual works: feeding the hungry, giving a drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, ransoming the imprisoned, burying the dead, instructing the ignorant, counseling the doubtful, admonishing the sinner, bearing wrongs patiently, forgiving offenses, comforting the afflicted, and praying for the living and the dead.

129 “The whole Catholic Worker 'program' can be incorporated into the notion of the Works of Mercy…. [s]piritual as well as corporeal. Peace witness and other protest for social justice are

129 Ibid., 54.

130 Murray, *Do Not Neglect Hospitality: The Catholic Worker and the Homeless*, 7, 263, footnote #3; Murray makes a footnote regarding the traditional Catholic claim for a biblical basis for corporeal and spiritual works of mercy. He states, “The first six corporeal works clearly are derived from Jesus' discourse on the Last Judgment (Matt. 25). The other eight, however, are drawn from more diverse biblical sources.” He cites Guyot (1947) as a reference, and concludes that of the list of fourteen works of mercy, the first six have a biblical basis.
examples of ‘rebuking the sinner’ (e.g. Day 1939, 138), while publishing newspapers is a means of 'instructing the ignorant.’”

Consequently, the movement’s roots as “religious-ethical radicals” contributed to its marginal political outcome, and therefore, set it apart from other social activist movements. A certain “other-world” ethic dominated in the Catholic Worker practice of social activism. Piehl states,

On the few occasions when a modest social influence was in view, it was rejected in order to define the group's higher ethical ideals. In the particular tradition of the radical Gospel followed by the Catholic Worker, political failure was justified by the mysterious language of religious paradox: losing one's life to find it, taking up the cross, the first shall be last and the last first.

In sum, following the tradition of the Gospels and the life and ministry of Jesus in the radical call to practice the works of mercy, the Catholic Worker movement aligns with Haight's first criteria for ecclesial structures in actualizing the memory of Jesus.

**Second Norm: Community in Houses of Hospitality**

In *A Long Loneliness*, Day writes, “A community was growing up. A community of the poor, who enjoyed being together, who felt that they were embarked on a great enterprise, who had a mission.” From the beginning, a strong sense of community characterized the Catholic Worker movement. By the second issue of *The Catholic Worker*, a community had begun to form. Young volunteers, attracted by the idea of social change, began to arrive. The earliest workers were college students skilled in journalism and newspaper editing who desired to put

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131 Ibid., 75.


into practice a new social ideal. Others found a place to contribute their service by preparing
food for the guests as well as the Workers who volunteered. Day recalls,

While not yet living under the same roof, in the first months a community began to form. What had been a basement barber shop without furnishing quickly became an oasis of warmth and welcome. More volunteers knocked on the door. It was a rare day without visitors. In the kitchen upstairs coffee was brewed throughout the day while a pot of stew seemed always ready for whoever was hungry. “We worked,” Dorothy recalled, “from early morning until midnight.”

The opportunity to nurture a cohesive sense of community came naturally with the opening of St. Joseph and Maryhouse, the first Catholic Worker houses of hospitality in New York City. “The spirit of community was and remains the underlying assumption of the Catholic Worker vision for social change.” Community in the Catholic Worker, because it is an ongoing struggle yet ideal of the movement, makes the Catholic Worker community the crucible in which authentic community is forged. Scholar and author, Daniel DiDomizio clarifies by stating, “Regardless of the actual living situation, people who allow themselves the vulnerability of stepping aside from the pursuit of material betterment and of performing the works of mercy form community as if instinctively.” As such, a communitarian spirit is woven through each aspect of the life of the Catholic Worker, from doing the works of mercy to eating together to editing the newspaper. “The Catholic Worker spirituality is profoundly communitarian.”

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134 Coles, Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion, 112.


136 Ibid., 225.

137 Ibid., 227.
Day recounts her early experience of the opening of the first house: “The idea of houses of hospitality caught on quickly enough. The very people that Peter brought in, who made up our staff at first, needed a place to live.” While the small nascent Catholic Worker community was still talking about the idea of providing housing for the poor, a woman in need knocked on Day’s apartment door inquiring about a place to stay. While the word had spread that accommodations were available at the Catholic Worker, up to that point the vision for houses of hospitality had not yet materialized. Day made space for the woman and word quickly spread to several other women also seeking shelter. The Catholic Worker rented the first apartment to provide housing for women and shortly after made other space available to house homeless men as well.

Within a couple of years, the New York Catholic Worker rented a house large enough to accommodate staff and guests. Rooms for sleeping, for meeting and dining together, for office space, and for storage of clothing donations were all made available within a common living quarters. The arrangement, though not without the eruptions of interpersonal conflict, forged a cohesive sense of community between Workers and guests, though at different levels. The houses were intended to be small communities in which those who were able to provide for the poor also lived among the poor; both the guests and the Workers merged and were nearly indistinguishable. Some visitors of the houses, seeking a cup of coffee or a hot meal, became such frequent guests that they found a permanent home at the Catholic Worker. “These were people who had gradually come to see the Catholic Worker not just as a place to have a meal or to find a few hours of shelter from the streets, but as home. One by one, they took possession of some daily chore, staked out a particular chair or corner, and came into possession of their own

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bed.”139 For Day, houses of hospitality provided a way in which she and others could assist the poor in an immediate and personal way. It was a life immersed in service, prayer, and reflection.140

The deep sense of community continues to be a significant factor to those who are attracted to the Catholic Worker movement today. Rosalie Riegel, having conducted 208 interviews compiled into an oral history of the movement from 1986 through 1991, notes an important aspect of why Workers were drawn to the movement: “To what do these people come and why? They come to small and intense communities…. Why do they come? They come to the Worker for both community and commitment.”141

Day’s Writes to Nurture Community

Day was intentional in forging collaborative relationships with those inside as well as outside the Worker community. She relied on appeals to friendship, relational interdependence, and, of course, personal responsibility to build a relational web that emanated from the founding houses of hospitality out to others. Day’s commitment to non-coercive principles and the desire for the common good strengthened a sense of community among other Catholic Worker communities. Robert Ellsberg reflects on Day's personal commitment to community:

[T]he major theme of her life was the search for community—whether in love and family, among friends and neighbors, in solidarity with all who struggle for a better world, or, in the supernatural plane, in the Mystical Body of Christ. Both in her youthful

139 Coles, Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion, 132.
140 Ibid., 113.
141 Rosalie Riegel, “A Long Loneliness: Metaphors of Conversion Within the Catholic Worker Movement,” in Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement Centenary Essays, ed. William J. Thorn, Phillip M. Runkel and Susan Mountin (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001), 564.
participation in the radical movement and later, as a Catholic, she resonated with the words of St. Paul: that we are all “members one of another”.  

Day understood writing as an act of expressing her commitment to others. The task of writing was participation in and giving of herself to the community. Ellsberg writes in his *Introduction*, “For Dorothy, the experience of community—with its griefs as well as its joys—was a foretaste of heaven. And that experience was reenacted in every occasion of genuine human connection—whether face to face, or through a letter.” In *All the Way to Heaven: The Selected Letters of Dorothy Day*, Ellsberg records that by Day’s estimation she had written over a thousand letters in one particular year, a pace which was not atypical for her. In a column for *The Catholic Worker* written in 1950, Day comments about the connection she made with others through her writing:

> The reason we write is to communicate ideas, and the reason for getting out the Catholic Worker each month is to communicate with our brothers. We must overflow in writing about all the things we have been talking about and living during the month. Writing is an act of community. It is a letter, it is comforting, consoling, helping, advising on our part, as well as asking it on yours. It is a part of our human association with each other. It is an expression of our love and concern for each other.

Her style conveyed a warm and companionable spirit. “Dorothy’s intensely personal approach to journalism was a major factor in the paper’s appeal.” Nancy Roberts makes a similar observation about the earliest writings of the paper. “Her supreme talent was the ability to

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143 Ibid.

144 Ibid., xxii.


146 Coles, *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion*, 118.
link the everyday and the ultimate, to cut through abstractions to reach grassroots Christianity.

All her life she was committed to addressing plain, ordinary working men and women who are Catholic or who respond to Christian social justice.\(^{147}\)

Fostering an ongoing, deep sense of community within the local Worker House as well as across the movement was given for Day. In the postscript of her autobiography she writes in poetic prose about the essential place community holds within the Catholic Worker:

The most significant thing is community, others say. We are not alone any more…. We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know Him in the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone any more. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship. We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community. It all happened while we sat there talking, and it is still going on.\(^ {148}\)

**Third Norm: A Personalist, Decentralist Praxis**

The daily practice of doing the works of mercy lent itself easily to the participative and inclusive nature of a personalist community. Maurin insisted that practicing the works of mercy was something that everyone can do. “The peculiarly unifying genius of the Catholic Worker lies in the fact that everyone can practice the works of mercy. One does not need to be a Catholic or a Christian to welcome the stranger, even though the Catholic Worker movement as a whole might see this action as a welcoming of Christ.”\(^ {149}\)

Explored in the earlier section on the philosophical impact of a personalist ideology, a shared sense of ecclesial mission is a natural outcome of such an approach. All can do the works

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\(^{147}\) Roberts, *Dorothy Day and The Catholic Worker*, 52.


\(^{149}\) McKanan, *The Catholic Worker After Dorothy*, 9.
of mercy; all can take personal responsibility. Day recalls Maurin's intuitive ability to tap into one’s desire to be a participant in the mission. He drew from several personalist philosophers and theologians, calling out the dignity of each individual, the inner motive of working toward the common good, and a sense of personal duty for the love of God. Day reflects:

Peter made you feel a sense of his mission as soon as you met him. He did not begin by tearing down, or by painting so intense a picture of misery and injustice that you burned to change the world. Instead, he aroused in you a sense of your own capacities for work, for accomplishment. He made you feel that you and all men had great and generous hearts with which to love God. If you once recognized this fact in yourself you would expect to find it in others.\(^{150}\)

For example, Day recounts the story of a young Lithuanian woman who came to the Catholic Worker house and immediately found a place to contribute:

\[W\]e never had any money, and the cheapest, most practical way to take care of people was to rent some apartments and have someone do the cooking for the lot of us. Many a time I was cook and cleaner as well as editor and street seller. When Margaret, a Lithuanian girl from the mining regions of Pennsylvania came to us, and took over the cooking, we were happy indeed. She knew how to make a big pot of mashed potatoes with mushroom sauce which filled everyone up quickly… She loved being propagandist as well as cook.\(^{151}\)

In summary, the theological foundation for the movement in the Christian Scriptures and the church’s social teaching, the creation of a Christian personalist community, and the principle of localism provide a values-based “structure” that optimizes compatibility with Haight's three criteria for functional ecclesial structures. Moreover, the embodiment of the Catholic Worker’s mission of doing the works of mercy, living in community in Houses of Hospitality, and participation in a personalist ethic aligns nearly seamlessly with Haight's three criteria.


\(^{151}\) Ibid., 185.
ANOMALIES: INCONSISTENCIES IN THE CATHOLIC WORKER MOVEMENT

Internal Organizational Model Study

In 1984, four years after the death of Dorothy Day, Michele Theresa Aronica conducted a sociological study of the internal organizational structure and leadership of St. Joseph’s and Maryhouse, the two New York City Catholic Worker houses of hospitality.\(^\text{152}\) Her research used criteria based on observation of relational dynamics such as participation in decision-making, membership, and responsibilities and roles, in order to determine the extent to which the founding principles of anarchism and personalism were truly operative in the Catholic Worker houses. According to Aronica, while the movement is founded under anarchist principles, she reports that after the death of Day there exists “visible distinctions in the amount of power held by some of the people in the group.”\(^\text{153}\) She locates power differentials using criteria based primarily on seniority and familiarity with Day. For example, those who had personally known Day and could report a relationship with her held more authority than those who could only claim Day as an acquaintance or who arrived at St. Joseph’s House after Day’s death. Aronica further identified an emerging organizational pattern in which levels of membership and authority existed with the group. She concludes that the house operated under hierarchal leadership patterns and therefore, based on the findings at one location, determined that the movement itself is hierarchically organized. Below is Aronica’s organizational chart:

\(^{152}\) Aronica, *Beyond Charismatic Leadership.*

\(^{153}\) Ibid., 150.
In addition, Aronica classifies the Workers’ roles in the house into a five-tier system, summarized as follows:

**Five Roles in the Catholic Worker Houses in New York City**

1. **Authorities** - exert overall control at the Catholic Worker through a “system of tradition;” knew Day and shared friendship with her; at Day’s death, Authorities “considered themselves heirs to her ideological beliefs”
2. **Volunteers** - administer services and maintain stability; operate the house; know Day through her writings
3. **Residents** - share duties of the house; have no decision-making power; committed to Day’s vision
4. **Aspirants** - prospective workers in the movement, considering membership as a life alternative
5. **Transients** - those who are served and in need of food, clothing, and shelter

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*Ibid., 152. It is important to note that she labels this chart as the organization of the entire movement: “Organizational Chart: The Catholic Worker Movement in 1984,” though only two houses were included in the study.*

Aronica argues that the movement does not align with the founders’ original intent for a personalist social movement. She establishes her research based on the following assumption and question: “Maurin’s ideological belief in anarchism and personalist philosophy assumes the goodness of man’s [sic] nature and suggests that society will be organized in such a way that there would be no need for rules and regulations. He focused on the idea that people would respond to what the needs of the group were to ensure the personal welfare of all.”\textsuperscript{156} She concludes that the organizational reality of the Catholic Worker movement does not conform to Maurin’s ideology,\textsuperscript{157} rather, “the Worker has developed patterns through which decisions are made and implemented. The group has also established modes by which order is preserved within the parameters designated by the movement.”\textsuperscript{158}

Boehrer disagrees with Aronica’s conclusion that the Catholic Worker movement has failed to actualize the anarchist and personalist ideals. He poses two rebuttals. First, according to Boehrer, she has based her research too narrowly, using only the two New York City houses to draw conclusions about the entire movement. He states, “Aronica focuses exclusively on the two New York City houses of hospitality: Maryhouse and St. Joseph’s, writing about how they have continued four years following the death of Dorothy Day. It should be noted that, when Aronica writes of ‘the movement,’ she does not mean the entire movement, but rather Maryhouse and St. Joseph’s House of Hospitality. This is problematic.”\textsuperscript{159} Secondly, Boehrer takes issue with her lack of clearly-defined anarchist principles and the decision-making criteria she was seeking.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 153.

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 149.

\textsuperscript{159} Boehrer, “Christian Anarchism and the Catholic Worker Movement,” 233-235.
before dismissing anarchist practices within the movement. He asserts, “Aronica’s conclusions about the lack of anarchism within the New York houses lacks clarity. First, Aronica never defines what she means by the term ‘anarchism’ (which she also refers to as ‘anarchy’).”\textsuperscript{160} He continues to then reference his own work which identifies three variations of anarchist expressions within the Catholic Worker movement.

In addition, according to Boehrer, Aronica employs a reductionist approach when assuming that anarchist communities do not have a decision-making process. He cites a parallel study conducted in the same year also focused on the New York City houses of hospitality. In contrast to Aronica’s conclusions, Murray states, “Given the strength of the commitment to anarchism, nearly everything was open to negotiation by almost everyone. Roles, rules, and statuses were negotiated in a way that does not happen in a bureaucracy.”\textsuperscript{161} Boehrer establishes his position, stating, “Contrary to Aronica’s observations, Murray concluded that the New York Catholic Worker was an excellent example of ‘negotiated order.’”\textsuperscript{162}

\textit{Dorothy the Anarch?}

As noted earlier, one must take into account “The Dorothy Factor” as a potential anomaly in the development of the Catholic Worker. As a charismatic founder and leader of the movement, Day played a critical role in personally preserving the anarchist expressions and personalist ideals of the Catholic Worker. Her gift of friendship and sense of collaborative spirit was notable—even in the face of diverse beliefs and conflicts between Worker communities—in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 239.
\item \textsuperscript{161} Murray, \textit{Do Not Neglect Hospitality}, 92.
\item \textsuperscript{162} Boehrer, “Christian Anarchism and the Catholic Worker Movement,” 240. Murray is quoted as identifying a negotiated order “which incorporated anarchist principles with decision making.”
\end{itemize}
preserving the movement. It is worth mentioning, however, several voices of dissent as an anomaly to the more idyllic notions of Day’s leadership role in the movement.

Catholic Worker Tom Coddington was disgruntled with the slow, seemingly unperceivable impact the movement made in actualizing social change. From his perspective, the movement’s personalist emphasis and daily practice of doing the works of mercy was an obstacle to real social transformation. Instead of prioritizing the needs of the poor, as Day insisted, he wanted to address structural injustice in a more organized and professional way. Dorothy insisted that the Catholic Worker would remain steadfast in doing the works of mercy, the central directive upon which she and Maurin had birthed the movement. In disagreement, Coddington claimed that Day’s leadership style was autocratic, she was inflexible on decisions, and she was not interested in “appointing anyone to have real authority.” According to Tom Cornell, when Day made a decision “there was no appeal from her decisions and no account for how she made them.” He similarly characterized Day’s leadership approach: “Dorothy was an anarchist as long as she could be the anarch.”

Day has been applauded for the high value she placed on freedom, particularly in granting it to younger Catholic Workers who stayed and worked in the houses of hospitality. On the other hand, she was criticized for not employing a more democratic style; there were no committees or voting members in the house. Forest recalls Day’s preference for a monastic model in which an abbess or abbot holds final decision-making power while daily tasks and

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164 Ibid., 134; quoting Coddington, uncited.

165 Ibid., 135.

166 Ibid.
decisions are under the purview of those who are charged with the work. Day states, “A baker should have charge of the bakery, a farmer should have charge of the fields.” From Day’s perspective, such mundane decisions have no need for a governing process.

In summary, there are several accounts of inconsistencies in the movement’s practice of anarchist principles, whether it was the St. Joseph House that was suspect to an internal hierarchical leadership structure or Day’s leadership that was perceived as more authoritarian than that of a founder of an anarchist movement. While the dissenters describe a handful of accounts, the inconsistencies do not overshadow the numerous authors and accounts that identify anarchist threads and personalist practices that are the foundation of the Catholic Worker movement. As personalist-based communities that continue to thrive without an organizational structure, the movement is held together by personalist values and practices rooted in the Christian tradition and the spirit of community, collaboration, and friendship Day modeled in building relational connections that unified houses of hospitality across the movement.

167 Ibid., 137.
CHAPTER THREE: BASE ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES OF LATIN AMERICA

“A Decentralized Communitarian Model”

“The Lord’s Supper in the Heart of the Jungle”
Sunday, August 7, 1983

Today, late in the afternoon, we celebrated Sunday Mass. The sun was setting as we began. It occurred to me that it was just at this hour that Jesus held his last repast with his disciples, and that his command, ‘Do this…,” was echoing two thousand years later here in the middle of the largest forest in the world.

The community had arranged itself in the afternoon shade, stretching along behind some lemon trees. The participants, about thirty of them, sat on benches, on tree stumps, or even on the ground, around the supper table.

While Sister Nieta was teaching the hymns, I prepared myself to hear confessions. Five adults came forward. The confessions were good and valid. Three were confessing for the first time—and they made their first communion during that Mass.

The Mass was unconstrained, focused on essentials. After all, it’s not at all appropriate to insist on the letter of the law or the official ritual in a situation where nothing is official. Everything went quite well.168

Introduction

The ecclesial and ministerial challenges faced by the Latin American Catholic Church in the second half of the twentieth century became the impetus for renewal at the grassroots level. The pastoral needs were significant in scope. The number of baptized Catholics outnumbered priests by tens of thousands to one. Sunday Mass attendance in a majority of the countries was at five percent or less169 and did not draw many men. Additionally, the dearth of religious education led to the rise of popular Catholicism without much attention to doctrinal belief and


169 Phillip Berryman, Liberation Theology: Essential Facts About the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America--and Beyond (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 64.
sacramental rites, a sign that according to theologian Phillip Berryman “express[ed] a suppressed aspiration to personhood” and the church’s loss of relevance to the Latin American people.\footnote{Ibid., 70-71.}

While Pentecostal churches found ways to meet the religious needs of the people, the influence of the Catholic Church continued to wane. Deep renewal was needed for the church in Latin America. Berryman frames the question: “How were the ideals of church renewal, laid out at the Second Vatican Council, to become a reality among the vast majority of Latin American Catholics? It would take far more than celebrating the mass in Spanish or Portuguese. What was required was a new model of the church.”\footnote{Ibid., 64.}

\textit{A New Model: Local Expressions of the Church}

Major ecclesial renewal was achieved through the propagation of the base ecclesial communities (BECs) model led by the work of priests, bishops, laity and religious in Latin America. In response to the perennial problem of the decreasing availability of ordained clergy and the need to meet the growing pastoral needs of the people, the laity became the primary administrative leaders of the community:

In the beginning, the lack of a priest was a problem for us. So we began to organize ourselves. Now, our liturgy team celebrates the Word of God, looking more and more on our reality. Today we actually celebrate our reality more than a Mass in the traditional sense. We make a liturgy of the life of the people, connecting it with God. Today, we’ve broken from our total dependence on a priest. If a priest comes now, it’s for baptisms, marriages or a big feast day. But the community itself works just fine with a sister or a lay missioner.\footnote{An interview with Edilson Herculano Da Silva in Mev Puleo, \textit{The Struggle Is One: Voices and Visions of Liberation} (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 31.}
The people began to realize that they themselves are essential participants in the life of the church. “Previously accustomed to seeing the church as the priest, or the large church building down in the town, or an organization with its own authorities like those of the government, they now begin to see themselves as the church.”

Out of necessity, the community gathered around the Christian scriptures rather than the Eucharist for spiritual growth and sustenance. Writing at the height of the BECs movement, Berryman reports, “In Latin America today the Bible is read in small village- or barrio- level groups by people sitting on benches, often in the dim light of a kerosene lamp.” “For them [the word of God] is the immediate point of reference, the source of inspiration, nourishment, and discernment. Quite often it is the primary catalyst of community. Unlike the sacraments, which are not always accessible, the word is always in their reach.”

Base ecclesial communities aimed to evangelize the poor through communion and participation with their members (the poor). “What the CEBs are, at the most elementary level, are communities of lay Catholics who share a common social situation and a common commitment to the ‘option for the poor.’ Still and all, however, they take on a variety of shapes and organizational characteristics, and manage to attract individuals from virtually all walks of

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177 Azevedo, *Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil*, 178-194.
life—young and old, rich and poor, male and female.” As such, the base communities functioned to “implement a religiously rooted commitment to this-worldly justice…. Some CEBs may focus on more devotional activities, others on social or political consciousness raising, and still others on more concrete issues such as land reform and infrastructural improvement.” For example, in a poor community in Para that was plagued by intolerable living conditions, base community member Toinha Lima Barros recounts how members took action to transform their community:

Millions and millions of trees are cut every day and thrown into the ovens for charcoal, to keep the ironworks running. As if this deforestation weren’t enough, the ashes from the production of charcoal infect our lungs! At night we can’t breathe. The children have asthma, bronchitis, throat diseases—all because of the smoke!

Last year, our neighborhood put up a big struggle against the production of charcoal ovens. A large group of us went to the Secretary of Health who eventually demanded that the ovens be closed. This was a great victory! But many other neighborhoods haven’t achieved this.

In effect, base ecclesial communities became the suitable local expression of the Latin American church and afforded the laity the opportunity to be participants and agents in their liberation from oppressive social conditions.

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178 W. E. Hewitt, *Base Christian Communities and Social Change in Brazil* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 106. The reason for various names for base ecclesial communities lay partly in the translation from Spanish and Portuguese, CEBs: *comunidad eclesiales de base*, comunidade in Portuguese, as well as the endorsement of CEB terminology at the Puebla Conference. The English translation, base ecclesial communities (BECs), is used in this dissertation.

179 Ibid.

The Success of BECs

The groundwork was laid for the success of the base ecclesial model in the decades before the Second Vatican Council. In several Latin American countries, including Brazil, Peru, and Chile, Catholic Action had successfully prepared thousands of laity as leaders in their communities, training them as lay catechists to form groups for prayer, bible study, and social justice involvement. In the face of a priest shortage, lay Catholics were sent out to develop small local communities between the 1930s and 1950s. As a result, the Brazilian church was ready for widespread implementation of base ecclesial communities initiated by progressive bishops returning from Vatican II. Bishop José Maria Pires recalls the sense of shared conviction experienced among the Brazilian bishops:

Unlike the other bishop conferences at Vatican II, we had the joy of staying in the same house together, all eighty-five bishops from Brazil! So, almost every afternoon, we’d gather together—discussing, debating and listening…. The unity which came from sharing the same quarters was very evident after the Council…. Returning from the Council, we began to meet and ask, “Who is this ‘People of God’ that the Council spoke of?” And we saw that the People of God are the eighty percent of our population who are poor, those in our churches, who are so open to the Gospel.181

One of the earliest episcopal initiatives came through the First Nationwide Pastoral Plan (1965-1970) in which Brazil’s bishops named BECs as an essential strategy in a five-year plan for renewal. The plan built upon a prior call for the formation of small communities as an extension of the parish under the Brazilian Bishops’ Conference’s Emergency Plan in 1962. The Pastoral Plan, in collaboration with the episcopal conferences of the Latin American Bishops (CELAM), had successfully launched the largest network of BECs in Latin American.

Two CELAM conferences held in Medellín, Columbia (1968) and Puebla, New Mexico (1979) were key events that contributed to the success of the BECs movement after Vatican II. The documents drafted at Medellín describe BECs as a “community of their locality or of their ambiance which is a homogeneous group and which has a size that allows for personal, fraternal contact with members.” This local and intimate gathering of the people of God is “the fundamental nucleus of the Church, the initial cell of the ecclesial structure.” The bishops at Puebla described the structure of the BECs as complementary to the institutional model. Puebla states that BECs are “a vital part of the broader, more universal and better-defined structure of the institutional Church.” The base communities are “the expression of the dynamic vitality at the grassroots;” a church “integrated in the whole people of God.”

In spite of cautionary pronouncements from Rome on the danger of liberation theology and its structural counterpart, base ecclesial communities, papal statements showed a measured support for their use in the Latin American Catholic Church. In the apostolic

\[\text{\textsuperscript{182}}\text{ Medellín, 10.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{183}}\text{ Puebla, 261.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{184}}\text{ In 1984 and again in 1986, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, then Cardinal Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, contested liberation theology for having adopted Marxist principles in his statements entitled “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation’” and “Instruction of Christian Freedom and Liberation,” respectively. Though John Paul II stated support for the BECs during his tenure, his appointment of some 300 conservative bishops to Brazil (the main hub of BECs activity) contributed to the re-centralization of the local church toward the parishes, and thus toward more clerical control that brought about a loss of episcopal support for further development of BECs in Brazil. In addition, liberation theologian Leonardo Boff was silenced by the Vatican in the mid-1980s for his book, }\text{\textit{Church: Charism and Power}. In an interview with Mev Puleo, Boff was asked what he thought was at the core of the conflict between the Vatican and liberation theology. He replied, “[P]ower…. So the clerical body retains all power in the church and administers this power ‘for’ the lay people, never ‘with’ the people. And the people don’t have a right to their own ecclesial projects and dreams! They have to dream what the clerics dream.” Puleo, }\text{\textit{The Struggle is One}, 173-4.}\]
exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI clarifies the role of BECs in the larger local church structure:

> [T]hey spring from the need to live the Church’s life more intensely, or from the desire and quest for a more human dimension such as larger ecclesial communities can only offer with difficulty, especially in the big modern cities which lend themselves both to life in the mass and to anonymity. Such communities can quite simply be in their own way an extension on the spiritual and religious level—worship, deepening of faith, fraternal charity, prayer, contact with pastors—of the small sociological community such as the village, etc.\(^{185}\)

John Paul II, in the 1990 encyclcal titled *Redemptoris missio*, conceived BECs as the decentralization of the local parish and the preference for the poor of society:

> These communities are a sign of vitality within the Church, and instrument of formation and evangelization, and a strong starting point for a new society based on a “civilization of love.” These communities decentralize and organize the parish community, to which they always remain united. They take root in the less privileged and rural areas, and become a leaven for Christian life, of care for the poor and neglected, and of commitment to the transformation of society.\(^{186}\)

Nevertheless, during the long tenure of John Paul II, his warnings against liberation theology\(^ {187}\) and decentralized BECs as a threat to the unity of the institutional church contributed to a loss of episcopal support. The effects were particularly reverberant in Brazil where the growth of BECs had gained momentum in the period after Vatican II. As a result, the BEC


\(^{187}\) In an opening speech at the 1979 Puebla conference, John Paul II rejects the notion of a political gospel as perceived in a liberation theology: “This conception of Christ, as a political figure, a revolutionary, as the subversive of Nazareth, does not tally with the Church’s catechisms.” John Eagleson and Philip Scharper, *Puebla and Beyond* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), 60 as quoted from Pierre Hegy, “Aparecida and the Future of the Catholic Church in Latin America,” *Social Compass* 59, no. 4 (2012): 541.
movement began to flounder as many ecclesial communities had become inactive or discontinued to function by the early 2000s.188

Christian Smith, a sociologist of religion who writes on social movement theory of liberation theology, claims that there were two practical factors that led to the success of base ecclesial communities in Latin America. First, they were organizationally and structurally advantageous for the spread of the newly emerging tenets and call to action of a theology of liberation. “BECs—the grass-roots innovation which would prove to be an excellent structure for the introduction, propagation, and survival of the liberation movement—were multiplying and thriving between 1965 and 1968. By 1965, the idea of BECs was promoted all over Latin America through seminars and courses.”189 On this point, “father of liberation theology” Gustavo Gutiérrez notes that BECs represented “one of the most fruitful and significant events in the present-day life of the Latin American church…. The Spirit is bringing to birth a church rooted in the milieu of exploitation and the struggle for liberation.” These communities fulfill “the demands of the gospel message, which proclaims a God whose love goes out to the poor by way of preference.”190 Likewise, José Marins, in the 1989 accessible and popular work The Church from the Roots, writes that BECs are “the dynamic reality of an evangelical, liberating and prophetic community opting preferentially for the poor…as a new model of Church and a seed


for the growth of a new model of society.”¹⁹¹ He continues, noting the purpose of BECs as a presence and sign in the world, “[T]he BEC is not an end in itself…. The goal of the BEC is the extension of the Kingdom of God…for deepening and intensifying faith and commitment.”¹⁹²

Manuel Vásquez describes the early stages of an existing base community in a small working-class neighborhood of Pedra Bonita, on the outskirts of Nova Iguacu, Rio de Janeiro. As the local base community emerged and began to stabilize as a result of the pastoral work in that region, an on-the-ground priest’s report surfaced that characterized the BECs as “a flexible ‘polycentered web,’ with some of the threads serving as the structural support for a whole array of activities, groups, and levels of involvement. The central threads converged in a ‘nucleus’ or informal ‘directorate’ consisting of the families of the five women who founded the community.”¹⁹³ Effectively, BECs became the catalyst for increasing the organizational capacity of people and leadership resources as well as the vehicle for advocating the emerging liberation theology movement leading up to and through Vatican II.

The second factor in the success of BECs, according to Smith, is the downward mobility of pastoral workers into solidarity with the Latin American poor. In the bishops’ effort to apply the renewed ecclesiology of Vatican II to their context, they “officially endorsed a radically innovative Church strategy” by which the alliances of church and state power structures could be disabled, “putting the weight of the Church institution into work for social-structural changes.”¹⁹⁴


¹⁹² Ibid.


The poor would be the benefactors of such structural transformation. “[M]any of the clergy themselves began to realize that they belonged among the poor. When pastoral workers did go to the poor, often one of their major pastoral ministries was starting and supporting BECs.” Smith concludes that in the effort to become the church of the poor, BECs were the bridge by which the pastoral workers could live among the poor, in solidarity, for the transformation of their own society.

FACTORS IN THE EMERGENCE OF BASE ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES

First Contextual Factor: A Consciousness of Global Poverty

Widespread poverty characterized the living conditions for the majority of Latin American peoples in the mid-twentieth century. The discrepancy of vast wealth and dire poverty was particularly striking in Brazil, between the affluent urban center and the flavela, or shantytowns in the city’s periphery. Critical awareness of such conflicting social and political realities, called conscientization in models of liberation, developed through encounters of extreme impoverishment in some parts of the world in contrast with the privileges of modern social advancement in other parts of the world. According to sociologist Marcello de Carvalho Azevedo, a global social consciousness legitimated “the basic equality of persons, which in principle should facilitate fraternity among all human beings; freedom, to be sought in all its forms on both the individual and societal levels; [and] solidarity, the visible projection of efficacious love, bringing human beings together around common objectives and prompting them to complement one another in overcoming limitations and dire wants.”

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195 Ibid., 201.

196 Azevedo, Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil, 181.
contradiction, however, between the theories of modern advancement and the realities of the “Two-Thirds World” marked by economic and political domination, became apparent. Azevedo explains:

[Our world] shapes societies in terms of institutional violence, patent or latent, in the short run or over the long run. Systems of domination, of differing ideological provenience, coexist, all of them imposing on wide areas an economic and political dependence that conditions or oppresses them. The fate of many is concentrated in the hands of a few; the many cannot break down this state of affairs and emerge free to pursue their desired autonomy.197

While the plight of the poor has historically been a focus of the church in various movements and vocations, it was not until the 1960s that church leaders and theologians understood the interdependent nature of global poverty. They confessed their blindness in “finding that there was a radical poverty on our continent, in the whole third world, and sometimes even in the first and second worlds. That poverty is produced, reproduced, and constantly aggravated by the worldwide organization of society, politics, and economics.”198

Responding to the crisis of a world that “is organized in such a way as to produce and reproduce this poverty”199 and desiring to minister among those in abject poverty, the Latin American bishops chose downward mobility in order to be in solidarity with the poor and to bring their theology in alignment with their experience. Elsa Tamez, Costa Rican feminist theologian, writes on the emergence of liberation theology:

The awakening of Christians to the challenges of the liberation movements and their active participation in those movements led theologians to elaborate a theology that took

197 Ibid.
198 Ibid., 178-179.
199 Ibid.
seriously the reality of poverty and exploitation and to take up the clamor of the poor. The climate of the church in the Catholic world was opportune.200

The Catholic hierarchy was committed to a preferential option for the poor, meaning that the church implemented a method of theology and praxis in which the choice and commitment was for the poor. “The poor...is the privileged place of the theological task.”201 Gutierrez writes, “As understood by Medellín, the option for the poor is twofold: it involves standing in solidarity with the poor, but it also entails a stance against inhumane poverty.”202

In practice, the hierarchy implemented a structural solution through the multiplication of BECs and the mobilization of pastoral workers in order to gain local access for direct and tangible ministry to the poor of society. Tamez notes the shift to an ecclesiology of liberation that engages in praxis, or reflective action mediated at the grassroots level: “The praxiological or pastoral practice seeks to make visible the commitment to justice in favor of the poor. This method is common in the Christian base communities and is expressed in a simple way by the terms: ‘see, judge, act.’”203 BECs, as the locus of liberation praxis, became the normative structural expression of a liberation theology.

The archdiocese of São Paulo in the late twentieth century serves as a key example. While São Paulo was seemingly an affluent city, a “peripheral zone” existed which was hidden

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201 Ibid., 5439.


203 Tamez, “Liberation Theology,” 5439.
from tourists and ignored by the wealthy people of Brazil. The zone on the outskirts of São Paulo was marked by severe poverty due to several social and economically dependent factors. Chronic unemployment and inflation had contributed to the poor resorting to panhandling and the selling of goods on the streets. The cost of living outpaced the meager low-income salaries; the absence of social services to subsidize income exacerbated the impoverished conditions. In addition, seventy percent of the population lived in severely inadequate housing. The “squalid slums or self-constructed housing in areas surrounding the central core” covered three-quarters of São Paulo’s urban geography.204 Those families who could afford housing typically lived in overcrowded situations, unable to afford the building materials to expand or build additional dwellings. The existing buildings were substandard and did not meet the necessary building codes to ensure the safety of the residents.

The infrastructure of the city was poorly developed or non-existent. Lack of basic provisions such as paved roads, street lighting, and police protection, contributed to the increased incidents of crime in already disadvantaged neighborhoods. The city transit system was inadequate to transport the poor who lived on the outskirts of the city and created conditions in which commuting to work was unsafe, unreliable and time consuming. “On average, transportation studies have shown a worker spends some three to four hours each day traveling to and from his or her place of work.”205 Finally, hospitals and treatment centers were more typically located in wealthy urban centers, leaving the poor without adequate and accessible health care facilities. The lack of health care was exacerbated by the unsanitary disposal of human waste. It is estimated that less than five percent of the poor neighborhoods were

204 Hewitt, *Base Christian Communities and Social Change in Brazil*, 29.

205 Ibid., 30-31.
connected into the city sewage disposal system. “In most neighborhoods, raw sewage is simply allowed to run down drainage ditches and into the nearest stream.”

In the backdrop, juxtaposed with the dire social and economic living conditions of the poor, stood the vast ecclesiastical structure that defined the São Paulo metropolitan region in the 1970s. In the wake of centuries of Colonial Christianity and the exploitation of indigenous people, the church remained an accomplice to structural domination and amassing of wealth, keeping church leaders buffered from the plight of the poor:

With a population of over 14 million, it was the largest ecclesiastical unit of its kind in the world. Territorially, São Paulo’s 5,000-square-kilometer land area was divided into nine episcopal regions, which together contained some 53 sectors and 395 parishes. Serving the faithful were one archbishop, 10 auxiliary bishops (9 of which presided directly over the episcopal regions), approximately 450 secular priests, 700 priests in orders, and 3,500 men and women religious. In addition, within its boundaries, the archdiocese owned or controlled a number of religious institutions and properties. Along with church buildings and related structures, there were no less than 11 secular seminaries and 26 others belonging to various religious orders, five ecclesiastical study centers, an archive, 10 higher-learning institutes (including a major university, Pontifícia Universidade Católica), and dozens of colégios offering elementary- and secondary-school courses.

In the early 1970s, archbishops supportive of the church’s commitment to the preferential option for the poor took action to correct the social and economic injustices in the diocese, such as selling the archbishop’s upscale residence and constructing a community center in the peripheral zone. The most notable pastoral initiative was the archdiocese’s prioritization and support of the implementation of base ecclesial communities. As a key strategy in the transformation of the Catholic Church in Brazil, the spread of BECs grew dramatically and became a vital presence in a short period of time. Hewitt’s estimation for the period between

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206 Ibid., 30.

207 Ibid., 31.
1974 and 1980 suggests that the number of BECs in Brazil grew from 40,000 to 80,000. Tamez concludes, “The ecclesiology of liberation has as its point of reference the experience of a new way of being a church in the Christian base communities. It is a church that understands itself and emerges from the poor. For that reason it has been called the church of the poor or church that is born from the people.”

Second Contextual Factor: The Deficiency of Vatican II

Only four months into his pontificate, Pope John XXIII (1958-1963) called for an ecumenical council. John XXIII had three desiderata, or desires, for the Second Vatican Council, including intra-ecclesial renewal, renewal of the church in relationship with the world, and becoming a church of the poor such that the church might more effectively, and with credibility, proclaim the message of the Gospel to the world. While steps were taken by particular bishops to prioritize the third concern on the floor of the Council, in the end the discussion was inadequate to bring about actual change in the church and thus, the desire to become a church of the poor did not materialize.

Lack of contextualization in drafting the Vatican II documents contributed to the Council’s failure to address the church’s relationship with the poor. Not only were the documents drafted from an industrialized, first-world perspective, but the European bishops and

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208 Tamez, “Liberation Theology,” 5439.

209 Simon C. Kim, An Immigration of Theology: Theology of Context As the Theological Method of Virgilio Elizondo and Gustavo Gutiérrez (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 17. Kim notes one exception found in Lumen Gentium 8. The church is called to follow in the path of Christ who emptied himself to become poor and who “carried out the work of redemption in poverty and oppression.” So too “the Church encompasses with her love all those who are afflicted by human misery and she recognizes in those who are poor and who suffer…. She does all in her power to relieve their need and in them she strives to serve Christ.” Kim acknowledges the few bishops of Vatican II whose efforts, along with John XXIII, were supportive of becoming a church of the poor.
theologians who authored the documents had no actual experience of the impoverished conditions of Latin America. Because of this gap in perspective, the documents were applicable primarily for the church in a Western context, while countries plagued with the world’s poorest people proved to be a secondary concern for the Council’s attention.\textsuperscript{210} Moreover, while Vatican II was understood be an “opening to the world” toward progress and modernization, for the Latin American church it was an opening to the world of oppression and exploitation.\textsuperscript{211} The relevant issues of Vatican II were rooted in concerns for the liturgy, authority, ecumenism and revelation, which in turn reflected the concern for keeping pace with a modern world. In contrast, the locus of concern of the Latin American bishops and theologians was “with participation in the Church and of Christians in the liberation of man.”\textsuperscript{212}

An additional factor at Vatican II, as noted earlier, was that the global and interdependent nature of structural poverty did not enter into the consciousness of the church until the mid-twentieth century. Azevedo notes that this collective consciousness “had not yet been sufficiently explicated at the time of Vatican II: the awareness of the flagrant paradox in our world and the realization that this framework could not be overcome without a real transformation of systemic organization producing it.”\textsuperscript{213} Similarly, Gustavo Gutiérrez recalls: “Around the time of Vatican II there was much talk about the church having to develop self-awareness. But clearly the church could not do that without subjecting itself to the mediation of the other and the world.”\textsuperscript{214}

\textsuperscript{210} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{211} Phillip Berryman, “Latin American Liberation Theology,” \textit{Theological Studies} 34, no. 3 (1973): 358.

\textsuperscript{212} Ibid., 364.

\textsuperscript{213} Azevedo, \textit{Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil}, 180.

\textsuperscript{214} Gutiérrez, \textit{A Theology of Liberation}, 110.
Ultimately, it was the first-hand experience of Latin American bishops, who had subjected themselves to the struggles for liberation of the poor, that became the catalyst for the progressive approach of the Latin American church. For example, the impact of Vatican II on Gustavo Gutiérrez was a key experience in bringing about a theology of liberation. Gutiérrez remained in his room during the last couple of days of the Council ruing over its impotence in advancing the pope’s intention to become a church of the poor. Theologian Simon Kim comments, “The Church of the poor was one of the ‘signs of the times’ described in the final document of Vatican II, Gaudium et Spes; yet, because the text addressed rich nations and not poor, Gutiérrez finds it difficult for the Church to be truly present in the world of the poor.”

While Gutiérrez was disappointed by the missed opportunities of Vatican II, he was not dissuaded; he returned from the Council motivated to reinterpret the teachings of Vatican II on behalf of the Latin American people. As a contextual theologian, he aimed “to develop pastoral plans which spoke to [Latin America’s] unique situations.” Kim writes about Gutiérrez’s response:

Surrounded by poverty and supported by Church leaders, Gutiérrez was then able to develop a theology of the reality already being lived out as Church. As a theologian addressing his own context, Gutiérrez has not been theologizing in a vacuum but rather in “organic communion with the people,” and as a militant theologian (one who actively engages), Gutiérrez has been “working with the pilgrim people of God and engaged in their pastoral responsibilities.”

Gutierrez returned to Latin American and was a key participant at Medellín where a preferential option for the poor was conceived and became a definitive theological statement of

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215 Kim, An Immigration of Theology, 25.

216 Ibid., 21.

217 Ibid., 25; Kim references L. Boff and C. Boff in Introducing Liberation Theology, 19.
the church. He was “compelled to carry on the work of the Council by proclaiming the Gospel in a relevant manner for today especially in light of the struggles of their people.” From Gutierrez’s perspective, the conference would become the fulfilment of John XXIII’s desire to become a church of the poor.

**Third Contextual Factor: Medellín Translates Vatican II for a Latin American Context**

The conferences of CELAM played a key role in the success of base ecclesial communities. The Second General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate gathered at Medellín, Columbia from August to September of 1968, and though only a two-week meeting, the conference had an enduring significance on Latin American countries. Medellín played an important role in providing a forum for the Latin American bishops to work out a theology of the Council suited for their own context.

Medellín became for Latin America what Vatican II was for the western church. Berryman notes that the Medellín documents, drafted by 150 bishops and 100 *periti*, strongly conveyed a separate identity from that of the European bishops. He concluded that there was a shift for Latin Americans, evident through the documents of Medellín, such that the conference was “a continental meeting of the episcopate to apply the Council to Latin America.” Faced with the same challenge to read the “signs of the times” as presented to the Euro-centric bishops, “the [Latin American] bishops set out to interpret the ‘signs of the times’ [as] a theological locus and summon from God.” This led to the discernment of a very different social and economic context and therefore, a new ministerial approach for the bishops of Latin America.

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218 Ibid., 21.


220 Ibid., 359.
Medellín Structured for Reality

The process of determining the signs of the times for a Latin American context was strikingly different from that of Vatican II. According to Berryman, a preparatory document was drafted for the pending Medellín conference that included a demographic profile of the sub-standard living conditions in Latin America. From this, the bishops projected the role of the church in society, followed by theological reflection and subsequent identification of relevant pastoral actions. Such a process of discovery, from observation to active response of the church, marked a change from the European theological method. Berryman notes that it “was a break from the traditional from-doctrine-to-application mode which insinuates that truth comes down to earth from above.”221 The result was a meeting of bishops that challenged the church of Latin America to be agents of transformation in society, enacted through concrete and grassroots change. “Priests, sisters, and lay activists eagerly seized the Medellín documents as a Magna Carta justifying a whole new pastoral approach.”222

The document reflected a three-part process: from assessment of reality to theological principles to pastoral options. It was structured to address the realities of its context and to mobilize the clergy and pastoral workers to implement concrete action for the transformation of impoverished areas of society. The result was a new approach to the theological method, one that prioritized contextual realities over ecclesial rubrics. In other words, the theological approach was subject to the contextual and ministerial needs. According to Berryman, “Such a structure seeks to situate the Church and theology in the human reality, specifically the reality of oppression and liberation, and in effect says that pastoral work and Church structures are to be in

221 Berryman, Liberation Theology: Essential Facts, 23.

222 Ibid., 24.
function of this human reality. Medellín seeks to integrate the perspectives of social sciences, theology, ethics, and pastoral reflection.\textsuperscript{223} Gutiérrez concurred, noting the essential step of historical awareness in the theology of liberation: “These liberation efforts are accompanied by a greater awareness of our reality, of the real life of the poor people in particular. Analysis of reality is a precondition if we are to be able to change it.”\textsuperscript{224}

In sum, Medellín contextualized the teachings of Vatican II for Latin American bishops. The bishops of Latin America took a different approach than that of their European counterparts. In developing a theology for their reality, liberation theology became the lens through which the ecclesiology of Vatican II made sense in the context of radical poverty among their people. Theologically, the work of CELAM was the bridge for the church in Latin America to reached out to the poor, and in practice, base ecclesial communities were the structural vehicle by which the church became the church of the poor.

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF BOFF’S BASE ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES MODEL

In the midst of the BECs movement, Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff issued a forthright critique of the overly centralized institutional church model and the associated mechanism of power that governs its ecclesial structures. In Ecclesiogenesis, he describes the organizational design of base ecclesial communities as an alternative model of church, expands on its governing theological substructure, and provides a solid argument against the institutional church as primary model.\textsuperscript{225} These contributions, in addition to his re-envisioning of the

\textsuperscript{223} Berryman, “Latin American Liberation Theology,” 359.

\textsuperscript{224} Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 109.

communitarian dimension of church in which “basic communities concretize a conception of church as a communion of sisters and brothers, as church-community, church-body-of-Christ, church-People-of-God,” makes him a key theologian in a study on the plausibility of a decentralized dimension of church structures. This section examines the theological foundation of base ecclesial communities from Boff's perspective.

**Boff’s Assessment of the Church’s Distortion of the Exercise of Power**

The church of the West has primarily been conceptualized through a juridical framework. Divine power and responsibility for the church is transmitted through Christ to his successors; the bishops and the pope become the “holding tanks” of power and authority. The result is a model in which the church is “divided between rulers and governed, between celebrants and onlookers, between producers and consumers of sacraments.” In *Ecclesiogenesis*, Boff issues an indictment against the church’s distorted exercise of power that is a consequence of its structural orientation. The institutional model linearizes Christ’s power and concentrates it at the top as a privilege of the ordained, rendering Christ’s power inaccessible to the whole people of God. In contrast, in his description of the decentralized design of BECs, the locus of the praxis of sacred power is through the charism of the gathered members of the church.

For Boff, the organization of ecclesial structures and the centralization of power in the institutional church model is a concern for human rights. There is a gap between the church’s theology and the actual practice of the fundamental, inviolable rights of the person. The ecclesial structures of power do not serve as instruments to protect human rights, equality, or the just

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227 Ibid., 24.
distribution of power, but rather they contradict these principles and keep power in the privileged tier of the ordained few. In ecclesial practice an inherent violation exists that “results from the power structures, institutional deficiencies, and distortions…inherited from models that no longer reflect reality.”\footnote{228} Boff clarifies his view, noting that the distortion is a “result of a certain way of understanding and organizing the reality of the ecclesial structure—a somewhat permanent state of affairs.”\footnote{229} He offers several concrete examples of the church’s violation of human rights, freedom, and/or moral conscience as unchallenged practices of the church, including the lack of decision-making power outside of the hierarchical center, discrimination against women who are categorically dismissed from sacramental ministry or ecclesiastical leadership, and priests who choose to leave the priesthood and are rendered to “sub-lay” status because “[t]heir decision of conscience is not granted moral legitimacy.”\footnote{230}

\textit{A Misguided Understanding of Power}

The dominant lens through which to understand the institutional model is within the framework of sacred power and the exercise of that power under the guise of divinely granted authority. Boff’s assessment is that “[t]he church understands itself primarily as the community invested with power (the hierarchy) together with the community deprived of power (the people of God, laity). The Church sees power as the greatest way in which the Gospel will be accepted, understood, and proclaimed.”\footnote{231}

\footnote{228} Leonardo Boff, \textit{Church, Charism and Power}, 33.  
\footnote{229} Ibid.  
\footnote{230} Ibid., 34.  
\footnote{231} Ibid., 51.
The exercise of ecclesiastical power has historically been based in an acceptance of “divine legacy,” that is, a logic that the church’s power originates with God and can only be channeled through the privileged few who are qualified by the sacrament of ordination to exercise divine power. The centralization of church structures eventually came to mean the “cephalization” of power—supreme and universal power resides in the pope as the vicar of Christ. Boff concludes, when divine power is understood through such a paradigm, Christ becomes the ruler who exercises power over another rather than the suffering servant who renounces and confronts earthly powers. Boff’s assessment is confirmed in the historical accounts of the church and the centralization of decision-making power as a function of the petrine office.\textsuperscript{232}

Boff asserts that the church’s claim of sacred power has not shielded the church from corruption inherent in the human power structure. The exercise of “this type of power has resulted in a wide range of pathological social manifestations”\textsuperscript{233} that have erupted in the church to squelch creativity, dialogue, and constructive critique. Spiritual disciplines such as obedience, submission, humility, and the call for order are used to exert power and to control dissenting masses. Boff concludes that as a result of the church’s negligence of the Gospel’s call to a just exercise of power, it has “followed the patterns of pagan power in terms of domination, centralization, marginalization, triumphalism, human \textit{hybris} beneath a sacred mantle.”\textsuperscript{234}

Boff concludes with three primary concerns that have contributed to the inconsistency between theory and practice of human rights in the church. First, the church continues to govern

\textsuperscript{232} Ibid., 53.

\textsuperscript{233} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{234} Ibid., 56.
itself under a social and political model of authority adopted from Roman and feudal political systems. As a result, “The power structure in the Church today is indebted to centuries-old patterns… [it] constitutes one of the principal sources of conflict with the rising consciousness of human rights.” This antiquated model, according to Boff, is characterized by unquestioned norms that ensure a hierarchical legacy of power. Practices that sanction perpetual sacred “orders,” the privilege of a lifetime possession of power, or the divine right to exercise absolute power, create an unjust mode of governance. Moreover, in a mechanism that normalizes the pursuit of greater and greater shares of sacred power through climbing to a higher ecclesial status, opens up the church to human corruption and the abuse of power. Because this power is sacred, granted from above and willed by God, and is “untouchable and not subject to internal criticism,” Boff concludes that it is a precarious type of authority.

Second, the pyramidal structure blinds the church’s awareness to its own legitimate degree of authority. “It considers itself to be the principle if not exclusive bearer of God’s revelation to the world,” and as a result claims to be the sole proclaimer, interpreter, and gatekeeper of God’s revelation. “The magisterium possesses a collection of absolute, infallible, and divine truths.” Moreover, as salvation is intimately dependent upon the possession of the exclusively interpreted truth, this mode of authority holds a secondary power over the laity. In other words, one’s salvation is dependent upon the unquestioned acceptance of the Magisterium’s interpretation of truth. Therefore, in this system the justification of sacred power

235 Ibid., 40.
236 Ibid., 40-41.
237 Ibid., 41.
238 Ibid., 42.
cannot tolerate any deviation from the normative interpretation of revelation with eternal consequences. Boff concludes, “[T]here will inevitably be repression of the freedom of thought within the Church.”239

Third, in the institutional model there are two kinds of Christians in the church. Boff writes, “[T]here is an undeniable division and inequality in the Church…. There are the ordained who can produce, celebrate, and decide and the nonordained who associate with and assist the ordained.”240 The problem in an inequitable model where the church claims divine origin of power is that “power that will not abdicate its privileges and rights, [even if] at odds with the inviolable rights of human persons (participation, symbolic production, free expression, etc.).”241 The consequence of such a power structure is that the laity “is faced with divine givens that exclude or subordinate the lay person to a group whose power comes from above…. There is no argument as to the legitimacy of the authority of the Church; it exists and is willed by God.”242 As such, Boff draws the conclusion that any ecclesial structure that facilitates the absolute exercise of power over another is a violation of the inalienable character and rights of the individual.

**Boff’s Decentralized Structure**

Looking more closely at the linear axis of power in the institutional model, Boff offers an interpretation of the institutional church as pictured below in Diagram 2.1, (1a). The issue with a linear, centralized model of authority is that the distribution of Christ’s power is mediated to the

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239 Ibid.

240 Ibid., 43.

241 Ibid.

242 Ibid.
laity only through the ordained, and therefore, in such a rendering the laity are recipients of Christ’s power rather than Christ’s mediators or instruments of sacred power themselves. “The power in this organization is concentrated along the axis of bishop/priest. The laity only receive. They do not produce in terms of organization or structure, but only in terms of reinforcement of the structure.”243 This design has largely been a pattern replicated throughout history around the bishop-priest-deacon triad. According to Boff, the design “makes the three to be privileged bearers of the Spirit, and the community is built around them, thereby establishing a division in which the members of the Church cease to be equal.”244

DIAGRAM 2.1 Boff’s “Conceptualization of Church”245

244 Boff, Church, Charism and Power, 156.
245 Boff, Ecclesiogenesis, 26.
An Alternative Pauline Structure

The organizational structure of the base ecclesial communities shown in Diagram 2.1 (1b) differs from the long-established model prescribed in the Catholic epistles and by Ignatius of Antioch in the early church. Boff notes that another model evident in the Pauline writings offered “a more fraternal and circular model in which everyone shared equally”:

As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit…. Now you are Christ’s body, and individually parts of it.

While the institutional model has more easily identified with patterns of secular, authoritarian models of governance, the decentralized model in the Pauline epistle has “always remained in the back of the Church’s memory.” It has at times been reclaimed by ecclesial renewal movements and by religious communities.

In the Pauline model the primary entity in the base ecclesial model is the Spirit of Christ; the people of God gather around the Spirit of Christ as a network of community clusters. Christ’s power is present and accessible to the “totality of the People of God as a vehicle of Christ’s triple ministry of witness, oneness, and worship.” Moreover, Boff asserts that the reality of the Spirit’s presence in the community, empowering every baptized believer to exercise their spiritual gifts for the good of the community, precedes the emergence of the visible, organizational structure. He concludes, “[BECs] is a Church that has definitively renounced the

246 Ibid.
247 1 Cor. 12:12-14; 27 (NABRE)
249 Ibid.
centralization of power; unity resides in the idea of Church as People of God, a pilgrim Church, open to the historical march of peoples.” BECs are the balance to the centralization of power in the linear institutional model of church.

ANCHORED BY HAITCH’S CRITERIA FOR ECCLESIAL STRUCTURES

Typical of a decentralized model, the BECs model depends upon criteria other than its structure for the stability of the movement. As noted earlier, Roger Haight’s three criteria for ecclesial structures—the memory of Jesus, a communitarian spirit, and a shared mission, are used to evaluate the degree to which BECs, as a decentralized movement, are anchored in the origins and tradition of the larger universal church.

First Norm: An Alternative Ethic of Power

Haight’s first criterion determines the movement’s capacity to actualize the principles and practices found in the teaching and ministry of Jesus. Seen most clearly in Church: Charism and Power, Boff imposes the restraint of a kingdom ethic upon the power structures that govern ecclesial practices. While Boff’s critique of the church’s historical exercise of power can be scathing at times, his desire is not to deconstruct the institutional church but to assist in “awakening the dormant heart of the institutional Church, encouraging the living presence and dangerous yet powerful memory of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” He calls for conversion of the current institutional power structure and the way that power is exercised in the church.

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250 Boff, Church, Charism and Power, 62.
251 Ibid., 48.
Boff claims that the “attitude of the institution” has historically embodied values and practices that are in opposition to the Gospel message. Such a perspective came about through reading the New Testament sources “with the eyes of those with power.” His critique is that “ecclesiastical power read and re-read the New Testament (almost only the epistles) for the first signs of thinking in terms of power, orthodoxy, tradition, preservation.” Therefore, power as domination was not only justified but also authorized through the readings of the early church accounts. Boff writes, “Institutions mean power…. The institution of the Church has suffered from this; power became a powerful temptation for domination and a substitution for God and Jesus Christ.” Consequently, the example of the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus, as one who relinquished power, was obscured in a reading-for-power approach. Instead, an institutional attitude was reinforced in the pursuit of preservation, stability, and unity. “The cause of Christ, of the historical Jesus who was poor, weak, powerless, critical of the social and religious status quo of his time, was enshrined and spiritualized by the institution and so divested of its critical power.”

Boff proposes that from the teaching and ministry of Jesus on the kingdom of God, the church can find a norm for the exercise of power. “[A] very pure rereading of the central message of Jesus Christ, of the gospel understanding of the structures of power and the importance of the Spirit in the Church, is essential.” It is a return to the “fundamental project

252 Ibid., 59.
253 Ibid., 48-49.
254 Ibid., 59.
255 Ibid.
of Jesus and the new way of relating that underlies his message.” According to Boff, based on Jesus’ injunction to his disciples, he taught how human relations are to be ordered and how power should be exercised:

Jesus summoned them and said to them, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Moreover, Jesus’ message was about “the Kingdom of God that included the liberation of the poor, comfort for those who cry, justice, peace, forgiveness, and love.” Boff envisions the kingdom of God as a reversal of the worldly exercise of power. For example, in a kingdom-informed approach, “[p]ower is the power to love. The power of love is different in nature from the power of domination; it is fragile, vulnerable, conquering through its weakness and its capacity for giving and forgiveness…. [Jesus] de-divinized power.” Therefore, the exercise of power is that of service by those entrusted with legitimate authority and governance. “This authority is to be exercised diaconally, like Jesus, full of respect between brothers and sisters and not between lords and subordinates.”

Commenting on Boff’s theology, ecclesiologist Richard Gaillardetz points to the kingdom of God as Boff’s underlying theological framework for ecclesial structures. He writes,

256 Ibid., 60.
257 Mark 10:42-44 (NABRE).
258 Boff, Church, Charism and Power, 59.
259 Ibid.
260 Ibid., 61.
Boff’s theological starting point is Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom of God. For Boff the kingdom of God refers to God’s intentions for the transformation of the world. The world, in turn “is the arena for the historical realization of the Kingdom.” The church is “that part of the world that, in the strength of the Spirit, has accepted the Kingdom made explicit in the person of Jesus Christ.” Consequently, all church structures and relations in the church are subject to the core values found in Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom of God.... Church reform must be nothing less than a re-creation of the church according to the values of the gospel.\footnote{Richard Gaillardetz, “Leonardo Boff: The Power of the Institutional Church—Can it be Converted?,” in \textit{Readings in Church Authority: Gifts and Challenges for Contemporary Catholicism}, Gerard Mannion, Richard Gaillardetz, Jan Kerkhofs and Kenneth Wilson, eds., (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 532.}

In summary, Boff’s model calls for restraint of the exercise of power and a redistribution of Christ’s power to the whole people of God. His proposal is based on a kingdom ethic and demonstrates an embodiment of the core values found in the life, teaching and ministry of Jesus. Therefore, it can be concluded that the BECs model realizes Haight’s first norm for ecclesial structures.

\textit{Second Norm: Communitarian and Institutional Tensions}

Haight’s second criterion discerns whether the ecclesial structure sustains a communitarian spirit and fosters the presence of the Spirit as the “force that holds the community together in bonds of faith and love.”\footnote{Haight, “The Structures of the Church,” 414.} Boff describes the close relational qualities inherent in the model: “Christian life in the basic communities is characterized by the absence of alienating structures, by direct relationships, by reciprocity, by a deep communion, by mutual assistance, by communality of gospel ideals, by equality among members.”\footnote{Boff, \textit{Ecclesiogenesis}, 4.}

Boff distinguishes between the communitarian and the societal aspects of church as human community. He notes that sociological characteristics such as “rigid rules; hierarchies;
prescribed relationships in a framework of a distinction of functions, qualities, and titles,” are absent in the life of the base communities. The absence of these qualities, according to Boff, is not to dismiss the inevitable presence of conflict that happens in any social formation. Yet, in such an effort the community authentically strives for a society in “which love will be less difficult, and where power and participation will have better distribution.” A communitarian spirit is nurtured “as an inspiration to bend one’s constant efforts to overcome barriers between persons and to generate a relationship of solidarity and reciprocity.” Therefore, Boff urges that the communities “represent a call for a more thorough living of the authentically communitarian values of the Christian message. Jesus’ whole preaching may be seen as an effort to awaken the strength of these community aspects.”

_Dialectic Poles of Institutional and Communitarian_

Boff does not diminish the need for the institutional dimension of the church, though he does seek to restore the tension of the institutional dimension in relation to the communitarian dimension. He suggests that the base ecclesial communities have served as a corrective to the institutional imbalance present in the church for centuries. “The church has acquired an organizational form with a heavily hierarchical framework and a juridical understanding of relationships among Christians.... In reaction, the basic church communities have sprung up.”

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264 Ibid.

265 Ibid., 5.

266 Ibid.

267 Ibid., 6-7.

According to Boff, the two poles of institution and community are always in tension in the church: “Human togetherness will always be charged with tensions between ‘organizational impersonal’ and the ‘intimate personal.’”\(^{269}\) The problem is not the ongoing tension of the two poles, but the distortion that arises in the church when “one pole seeks to absorb the other, cripple it, liquidate it.”\(^{270}\) The two poles coexist and, when permitted to find a suitable expression, will function to keep the other in check: on the one hand to prevent “the institutional to become necrophiliac and predominate” and on the other hand to prevent “the communitarian to degenerate into pure utopianism.”\(^{271}\)

Nevertheless, in the church the communitarian dimension must retain a certain primacy over the institutional; the institutional must be in service to the communitarian dimension. While institutionalization guards founding ideals and ensures the posterity of the organization, the process can put at risk the vivacity of the community from which the new movement gained initial momentum. In other words, the communitarian spirit is continually in danger of withering. According to Boff, in order to foster the dynamism of the founding community, “the communitarian spirit stands in constant need of nourishment and stimulation... as a spirit to be re-created and to be renewed by overcoming routine and refusing to yield to the spirit of institutionalization and ‘rut.’”\(^{272}\) A tension is at work: the communitarian dimension requires ongoing attention so that the institutional dimension, if left unchecked, does not eclipse the communitarian spirit.

\(^{269}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{270}\) Ibid., 7.

\(^{271}\) Ibid.

\(^{272}\) Ibid., 5-6.
Boff proposes that the communitarian spirit is best nurtured in small group formations. Base ecclesial communities seek to foster community ideals, and thus to restore balance to the overly institutionalized shape to which the church has acquiesced. The base ecclesial communities, organized as a network of small group gatherings, give the communitarian spirit a deliberate structural expression and a place of primacy within the larger institutional structure. Boff describes the base communities as a “new type of institutional church” that has emerged within the church. “They are communities within church society.”

Marie Conn summarizes the contribution of Boff’s ecclesiology: “As Boff sees it, the two models of ecclesial organization—as institution and as the event of community—are neither mutually exclusive nor, ideally, in competition with each other.” The BEC model affords the smaller group a place for vivacity and renewal while situated in the larger church as institution. Conn offers that the contribution of BECs to the institutional model is “in the dialogue between these two ecclesiological models, a dialogue that can occasionally be intense and confrontational, that the ‘conscientization’ of the church as a whole occurs, especially with regard to the poor of this world.”

Third Norm: Organized by Mission

Finally, Haight’s third criterion discerns if the structure functions to promote the mission of the church as the responsibility of the whole people of God. Boff describes the participatory nature of the model, calling all the people of God to be vital participants in the mission: “By faith

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273 Ibid., 2.
274 Ibid., 5.
and baptism all are directly grafted onto Christ. The Spirit becomes present in all.... In this community all are sent, not just some; all are responsible for the church, not just a few; all must bear prophetic witness, not just a few persons; all must sanctify, not just some.”  

Boff constructs a model in which the “basic communities concretize a conception of church as a communion of sisters and brothers, as church-community, church-body-of-Christ, church-People-of-God.” The basis of the structure is Vatican II’s governing metaphor of the people of God; therefore, all the baptized are rightly organized to receive Christ’s power and to be co-participants in the mission of the church. Boff contends, “The laity emerge as creators of ecclesiological values” rather than mere recipients of those values.

Because the communitarian dimension has been eclipsed as a consequence of the hierarchical shape of the church, communal and social values essential to church identity have been must find an avenue in which they can be expressed. Azevedo comments that the decentralized organizational style of BECs “helps to bring alive the perduring identity of Jesus Christ’s Church in a more communitarian and participatory way.” Therefore, in the base ecclesial communities model, practices such as collaboration and participation are structurally normative rather than the exception as in the institutional model.

In addition, ministerial roles are reimagined in Boff’s decentralized model. Emphasis is placed on the diversification of members, charisms, and ministry, and also on rethinking the charism of governing and pastoring. While all members are equal in the community, each

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276 Boff, Ecclesiogenesis, 27.

277 Ibid.

278 Ibid., 26.

279 Azevedo, Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil, 206.
exercises different charisms and roles. Subsequently, new relationships between the office of bishop, priest, and laity must be envisioned. In Diagram 2.2 the inter-relational dynamics of laity, priest and bishop have been reconceived such that “all three terms establish a network of relationships with one another, involving one another in circularity…. All three terms are responsible for the entire reality of the church”.  

DIAGRAM 2.2 Boff’s “A New Church Structure”

The role of the bishop and priest, as a charism of governance and pastoring, function among the ecclesial community as “animation and inspiration, of unity and universality.” The ministry of unity, according to Boff, is one that arises from within the community rather than from the outside and is at the service for the good of the community. “The service of unity, from [base community] monitor to pope, is not an autocratic power over the church, but a power at its heart and for its service.” Boff provides an illustration below in Diagram 2.3:

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280 Ibid.

281 Boff, Ecclesiogenesis, 32.

282 Ibid.

283 Ibid., 28-29.


**Vocation and Mission as Organizational Key**

The principle organizational factor in Boff’s participatory approach is not ordination but the movement’s involvement in the liberating mission of Jesus. He notes, “The functions of bishop and priest are not reduced, minimized, or distorted; but the whole relationship between bishop, priest, and lay person is reorganized, so that all of them become important.” In contrast to the old design that “in principle, excluded lay people and asserted clerical hegemony,” the organizational key shifts to the principle of mission. All participate in the

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285 Azevedo, *Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil*, 207.

286 Ibid., 206.
ministerial activities and decision-making of the community by the call to participation in mission. In practice, unlike the linear model in which decision-making is made only along the pope-bishop-pastor axis, the BECs provides a place where the power of decision-making originates from within the ecclesial community and the locally appointed leaders. Boff states, “In their own ambit, the laity take up the cause of Christ and share in the decision-making of their local church.”

In re-envisioning the roles of bishop and priest, Boff’s model weakly supports a sacramental view of the church, particularly in comparison to the institutional model. The role of the bishop and the centrality of the Eucharist are seemingly in the shadow of his emphasis on the laity and the virtues of living as a kingdom community. Boff, however, assures that “[t]hese communities ardently desire to be able to celebrate the Eucharist.” The unavailability of ordained priests prohibits the communities from frequent celebration of the Eucharist. Moreover, he does not intend a declericalized model nor one that is deliberately non-sacramental. The structural design demonstrates that the role of the bishop is not diminished; rather, it is reimagined as one of many charisms given to the whole body of believers for their mutual edification. While all gifts in the church are equal, they are necessarily differentiated among lay and clergy roles. “[I]n a church organized around charism, while hierarchy is essential, it will be understood as subsisting within the faith community and at its service.” In conclusion, Boff’s decentralized model and distribution of power and charisms extends co-responsibility of the mission of the church to all members.

287 Boff, Ecclesiogenesis, 32.
288 Ibid., 61.
289 Conn, “Plurality in Unity,” 19.
ANOMALIES: IDENTIFYING INCONSISTENCIES IN THE BECs MODEL

Diverse Governance and Dependence upon the Institutional Church

Boff’s ideal for BECs is an equal distribution of shared power among the whole community; however, on-the-ground reports indicate a more diverse reality for BECs situated in different contexts. Hewitt notes that the organizational structure and actual coordination of BECs vary, depending upon local community leadership. In general, lay leaders carry a majority of the leadership functions, but governing functions are diverse and span from democratic to oligarchic in nature, as would any other social organization. Some operate under democratic, cooperative, and participative decision-making by representative councils, while others operate out of an autocratic governance structure in which membership appoints a leader from its own community and is given authority to act in the community’s best interest. Other communities accept the authority of the local parish priest or nun. While the method of governance is diverse, base communities are ultimately subject to the oversight of the institutional church.

Pastoral Agent as Initiator and Creator

Hewitt’s research on the BEC movement show that the presence of a pastoral agent is essential to the creation and sustainability of communities. He states, “The perceived need on the part of the hierarchy for control over the CEB phenomenon has affected all aspects of group life. Where and when the groups will emerge, the types of activities they will engage in—all of these things are determined, to varying extents, by hierarchical initiative.” He demonstrates that the success of BECs pivots on the presence of a local pastoral agent. The role of the pastoral

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290 Ibid., 56.

291 Hewitt makes his assessment based on data from a survey of BECs conducted by Thomas Bruneau in six dioceses in Brazil in the early 1980s. See also Thomas C. Bruneau, The Church in Brazil (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).
agent, often assigned by the bishop through pastoral planning directives, directly influences the ongoing vitality of the base communities. The hierarchical leadership and its administrative support (or lack of) determine whether BECs will emerge or remain dormant in an area. For example, Hewitt reports on an assessment by social scientist Thomas Bruneau: “[M]ost of the groups [in São Paulo] owe their origins to hierarchical initiative. Of the 22 CEBs originally sampled in 1984, 16, or approximately three-quarters, were founded with the assistance of priests or nuns dispatched from the local diocesan office.” Additionally, Hewitt credits a study by Adelina Baldissera for verifying the need of a pastoral agent, stating, “CEBs do not emerge spontaneously. Together and each one, there always exists the presence of a bishop, priest, religious or layperson, denominated by the Church hierarchy as a pastoral agent…. All of the CEBs are strongly marked by the presence and intervention of these pastoral agents.”

Generative Priority

Azevedo contests Boff on the principle of “generative priority.” The term identifies the locus of initiative in creating and supporting a community of faith and determines whether it originated first with the hierarchy or priest (i.e., a pastoral agent), or emerged as a result of the community itself as creators of church. In other words, generative priority asks whether the base ecclesial community arises from the grassroots or from the initiative of the hierarchy. With equal significant, generative priority asks if the emerging community themselves determine the need for the charism of governing and pastoring and when it is necessary to call upon the hierarchy to fill the need. Boff believes that locus of generative priority belongs to the community of lay people.

292 Hewitt, *Base Christian Communities and Social Change in Brazil*, 56.

Azevedo, however, argues that in reality, generative priority does not always lie with the faith community; either is possible. He notes, “In Brazil and elsewhere it is often the case that the hierarchy creates the group of believers that form the community. This is just as frequent as cases where communities form on their own, without hierarchical initiative, and then look to the hierarchy for recognition, legitimation, support, and communion with the larger church community.”

Azevedo offers his assessment, noting that if legitimation is not sought and received by the hierarchical church, “we do not yet have an ecclesial community in the proper sense, according to Catholic theology.”

*Ecclesiastical Control*

Communication between BECs and the hierarchical church happens through regular contact with the parish and church-sponsored meetings or conferences. As such, the hierarchy ensures conformity to the church through diocesan-wide distribution of liturgical resources and teaching materials. Even social and political events are subject to a certain amount of institutional control through pastoral agents. Hewitt confirms, “The pastoral agent’s presence and function…is not necessarily viewed passively by group members themselves…the agent’s involvement in the group is highly valued. This is true not only because of the material or organizational assistance he or she can offer, but also because of the agent’s spiritual significance.” He concludes, however, that while there is certainly a measure of institutional control in the operation of BECs, there is also diversity of organizational approaches across the movement.

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294 Azevedo, Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil, 204.

295 Ibid.

296 Hewitt, Base Christian Communities and Social Change in Brazil, 58.
Hewitt notes that the primary concern among the hierarchy is the risk of BECs being manipulated by political extremists for the use of violence and zealot-like thinking in the community. In conducting interviews with key bishops, Hewitt reports their concern: “without constant hierarchical vigilance, the CEBs might fall prey to manipulation by secular forces and thus move away from the Church. In their minds, the threat of CEB instrumentalization from both the right and the left of the political spectrum was a clear and present danger.”

*Impact of the Interdependency of BECs and the Institutional Church*

In light of the ecclesiastical initiative and support that boosted the success of BECS, in the same measure, control of the future of BECs lies with the hierarchical church. While the network of BECs had grown to cover a territory large enough to be self-sustaining, from Hewitt’s perspective, hierarchical support is necessary for long-term sustainability. At the peak of the BECs phenomenon, Hewitt reports, “[I]f trends [of hierarchical control] within the institutional Church continue… the groups are unlikely to survive in the face of increased hierarchical opposition or indifference. The same institution that has nurtured the CEBs seems well-positioned to orchestrate their downfall, and capable of doing so, should this be the desire.”

Hewitt subsequently reported in 1991 that decreased ecclesiastical support led to reduced BECs activity in the São Paulo archdiocese. He observed that the ties between hierarchy and base communities had “proven equally conducive to a partial dismantling of much of what the CEBs have accomplished to this point. In São Paulo, especially, a diminished emphasis on the CEBs at all institutional levels has directly contributed to a certain paralysis of the CEBs’ key

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297 Ibid., 54.

298 Ibid., 108.
community-action function and, thus, of the process of citizenship building.”²⁹⁹ As a matter of fact, reports from 2000 demonstrate that this was the case with BECs in Brazil. Charmain Levy, in “CEBs in Crisis: Leadership Structures in the São Paulo Area,” notes that after the division of the São Paulo archdiocese by the Vatican in 1989, the less supportive bishops “had a detrimental effect on CEB structures, content, and member composition. Base communities have gone from a relatively decentralized form, distributing tasks and, at times, decisions among community members, to a form that centralizes the power of decision and action in the hands of parish priests.”³⁰⁰ In addition, sociologist Pierre Hegy reported in 2012 that there “are no good statistics about sacraments and Church attendance”³⁰¹ coming from the church in the Latin American. Nevertheless, there are pockets of spiritual vitality in which prayer groups, training centers for pastoral agents, and lay leaders and preachers are gathering in small Christian communities “without asking the parish priests.”³⁰² Independent of ecclesiastical control, these small communities are thriving. Consequently, the degree of interdependence between the church’s hierarchy and BECs has had lasting repercussions on the sustainability of the movement, which has at times caused the movement to thrive, and at other times has shut down its momentum.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 107.

³⁰⁰ Charmain Levy, “CEBs in Crisis: Leadership Structures in the Sao Paulo Area,” in The Church at the Grassroots in Latin America: Perspectives on Thirty Years of Activism, eds. John Burdick and W. E. Hewitt (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), 171-172. As noted in chapter one, though John Paul II stated support for the BECs during his tenure, his division of the diocese and appointment of some 300 conservative bishops to Brazil (the main hub of BECs activity) contributed toward more clerical control that resulted in a loss of episcopal support for continuing development of BECs in Brazil.


³⁰² Ibid.
In sum, the relationship between the base ecclesial communities and the established hierarchical church, through the exercise of the bishop’s local authority, is a factor that has consequences in the long term sustainability of the model. In addition, the locus of initiative by which base communities are started, including the presence of a pastoral agent that provides ongoing leadership for the community, is a contributing factor that at times is in conflict with Boff’s ideal for a charism-based ecclesial community. These points of departure are more fully addressed in chapter five as concerns for the way power is exercised in the church and the impact it has on either the creative realization of the church’s mission at the local level or the obstruction of that mission.
CHAPTER FOUR: WOMEN-CHURCH

“A Radical Democratic Model”

In April, 1988, about thirty women met for the first time for the purpose of forming a Womenchurch. Today, three years and one month later, we still meet once a month in each other’s homes. The group averages between fifteen and twenty at a meeting. Several denominations are represented. There are ministers, psychologists, an author, nuns, social workers, media librarian, chaplain, and me, the token crone. On this past Mother’s Day I sat in a Roman Catholic Church (not my own congregation) and listened to the pastor tell me that Eve and I introduced sin into the world and the Blessed Virgin Mary redeemed us. Ah, but women have their ways. My ninety-year-old mother turned off both her hearing aids and I composed a poem.  

Introduction

A rising feminist consciousness in the twentieth century revealed a patriarchal ideology deeply woven into the fabric of American society and the institutional church. The pervasive logic of patriarchy, notable in the hierarchical structures of the Roman Catholic Church, has historically pushed women to the margins of ecclesial life. They have felt alienated and invisible because the church has failed to receive women and their giftedness. From sacramental and liturgical to diaconal and administrative roles, women have been excluded from participation in the church because they are women.

Feminist theology arose as a contextual theology centered on the task of normalizing women’s equality, experience, and dignity as a unique aspect of creation as much as that of the historical male experience. Such women-centric perspectives became the starting point and

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norms for theological reflection and, consequently, reoriented an understanding of God, the interpretation of scripture, and teachings of the church in counter to andro-centric norms.

As a form of liberation theology, feminist theology seeks the liberation of women from patriarchal systems in society and in the church. Patriarchy as structural domination has historically governed social order and remains in place even in today’s modern societies. Mary Grey, feminist theologian from the UK, expounds on its ideological pervasiveness: “[I]n patriarchal systems more men occupy positions of power, power that has been used to subordinate and oppress women. But we now recognize that patriarchy is a system of disordered relation from which both men and women suffer in different ways.” Anne Clifford defines the far-reaching impact of patriarchy, defining it as “systems of legal, economic, and political relations that legitimate and enforce relations of dominance in a society. It functions as an ideology that affects every aspect of societal life.” Patriarchy as praxis takes the “form of a pyramid of power in which all questions are determined from the top.”

As an unchallenged perspective, a patriarchal ideology is deeply ingrained in cultural norms, family roles, and most unsettling, in the Christian theologies and structures that govern the people of God. Feminist theologian Anne Carr writes, “[I]n Catholic theology, a male-centered and male-authored perspective, derogatory of women, was so pervasive that in the


entire tradition was skewed and needed to be righted.”¹⁰⁷ One area in which the impact of feminist theology in ecclesiology has largely been felt is the deconstruction of organizational structures that has excluded women from ecclesial and decision-making roles. “Church traditions and structures seem intractably patriarchal and hierarchical.”¹⁰⁸ Mary Hines notes that the liberating task of feminist theology is not only theoretical but practical as well. “Among all liberation theologies, feminist theology is the strongest voice calling for the church to apply its concern for liberation and empowerment for all people to its own internal structures…. Feminist theologies reiterate that to call for justice in the world the church must itself first be just.”¹⁰⁹

**Women-Church**

During the period of the second-wave feminist movement in the U.S., Roman Catholic women began to speak out and to call for a church marked by structures of inclusion rather than exclusion. The Women-Church movement emerged in the early 1980s to work for the transformation of the patriarchal church and to model an alternative way to be the church. It grew into a network of diverse, global-wide feminist base communities of more than thirty autonomous groups that remains viable today. Committed to a minimum of external structures, the Women-Church is held together by a common vision of a radically inclusive church that is free from the constraints of institutional authority and control. As a result, Roman Catholic women have claimed for themselves that they are indeed the church:


¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 167.
As a Roman Catholic woman, I live with the pain of belonging to a church institution probably unparalleled in its structural sexism and its commitment to an authoritative hierarchy (and too often an implicit theology) that is exclusive and oppressive. I have felt silenced, ignored, invisible, unimportant. But as I’m always telling anyone who’ll listen—it’s not their church, it’s not Rome’s church, it’s our church. We don’t have to fight for a place in the church, because lay women and lay men are the church, the body of Christ.  

The *Women-Church Sourcebook*, co-authored in 1993 by feminist theologian Mary Hunt and liturgist Diann Neu, provides a brief history of the movement, an overview of its identity and purpose, and practical guidelines for leading Women-Church communities. According to the *Sourcebook*, Women-Church is “a global, ecumenical movement made up of local feminist base communities of justice-seeking friends who engage in sacrament and solidarity.” The authors identify four general characteristics that typify the movement. First, Women-Church is global in scope. Conceived in the United States, it spread into other countries, including Korea, Canada, Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand. In contrast to the liberation model of base communities in Latin American, Women-Church communities in the United States do not have any structural connection with the institutional, hierarchical church. What the two movements share, however, is a liberation praxis, that is, a commitment to practices of solidarity and concrete action for social and political transformation in the church as well as in the world.

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Second, Women-Church is a diverse expression of local feminist based communities that reflects the context and the people in which it was formed. Groups draw women from many traditions—Catholic, Protestant, Judaism, and even Native American and Goddess religions. According to the Sourcebook, “Women-church as an ecumenical experience invites women who have no previous, or at least no recent, affiliation with church to join with other women in search for meaning and value.” A recent status of the movement, however, reflects less ecumenical diversity across the Women-Church coalition. According to the Women-Church website, the movement is “a coalition of autonomous Catholic-rooted groups working to build just social and ecclesial structures with shared power for everyone, especially women and those whom church and society marginalize.” Of the almost thirty groups listed on the 2014-2015 membership list, most use the name Catholic or self-identify from within the Roman Catholic tradition.

Third, Women-Church is a gathering of “justice-seeking friends.” According to the Sourcebook, Women’s friendships are much more than merely social, one on one relationships; they are “political, life-sustaining and community enhancing” friendships. Mary Hunt identifies a particular “revolutionary power” in friendships between women, a power that enables them to be agents of social transformation. In regard to the political dimension, “[t]o be friends is the ultimate political act. It is the deepest affirmation of human community. It is the foundation

313 Neu and Hunt, Women-Church Sourcebook, 3.


of women-church…. We do this as justice-seeking friends who engage in revolutionary praxis fortified and accompanied by one another.”

Fourth, Women-Church groups practice sacrament and solidarity. “[S]acrament is an act of lifting to public expression the everyday life of people because such life is holy.” The sacramental life of the Women-Church movement involves both familiar and unfamiliar liturgical practices including music, chants, silence, candles, and even flowers in order bring intention into each day. Acts of solidarity are evident in the movement’s work for legislative change, in public protests, and in providing for those in need. “Solidarity is just as spiritual as sacrament is political in women-church.” For example, one such community found solidarity in the sacramental act of gathering for liturgy: “About thirty-five Catholic lesbian women meet monthly as a church and celebrate liturgy. They have been denied both support and recognition by the institutional church, and they are often put down by other lesbians for remaining Catholic. However, they value the rituals, sharing, and personal support of this Catholic community.”

In sum, Women-Church is a movement of diverse, though typically Catholic, feminist liturgical communities that engage in a four-fold mission of sacrament, solidarity, justice, and inclusion. While this broadly defines the purpose and bounds of the movement, three American feminist theologians in particular—Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Mary E. Hunt—have made significant theological, liturgical, and practical contributions. Each of

316 Ibid.
317 Ibid.
318 Ibid.
319 Winter, Lummis, Stokes, Defecting in Place, 144.
these women have left distinct marks on Women-Church through their commitment to women, to theology, and to the transformation of the church.

**The Pioneers of Women-Church**

Three American feminist theologians offer a distinct aspect to women’s self-identification with and participation in the church. Feminist biblical scholar at Harvard Divinity School, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza was first to use the expression *ekklēsia gynaikōn* to raise consciousness of the feminist movement in the church. *Ekklēsia*, as the New Testament word for church, in combination with the qualifier *gynaikōn* (of women), places the emphasis on the equal status of women with access to all ecclesial roles in the church. At the same time, the phrase challenges the norms of a historically andro-centric church and identifies a clear corrective. Schüssler Fiorenza states, “I coined the expression *ekklēsia gynaikōn* as a counterterm to patriarchy in order to assert that...women are church—*ekklēsia*—and we have always been church.”320 The phrase employs new language to communicate resistance to the patriarchal ideology in the Roman Catholic Church and its practices of denying women instrumental roles within the church.321

Schüssler Fiorenza envisions a radically inclusive church free from ecclesial practices marked by classism, sexism, and clericalism. Women-Church functions “not on the fringes of the church but as the central embodiment and incarnation of the vision of the church that lives in solidarity with the oppressed and the impoverished, the majority of whom are women and

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children dependent on women.”\textsuperscript{322} She draws from the Vatican II vision of a participatory church model and the governing image of the People of God.\textsuperscript{323} Women who have “reclaimed [their] baptismal call to the discipleship of equals”\textsuperscript{324} are empowered to become full participants in the church. Schüssler Fiorenza, however, exposes the misogynist practices that continue to exist in spite of the Council’s teaching on an inclusive ecclesiology. She states, “[T]he purpose of qualifying and defining church/ekklēsia with the term ‘women’ was precisely to bring into public awareness the fact that neither church nor society are what they claim to be: ekklēsia, a democratic congress of self-governing citizens.”\textsuperscript{325} Even today citizens of democratic western societies “struggle in order to achieve the rights, benefits, and privileges of equal citizenship which are legitimately theirs but which are denied to them by the patriarchal and kyriarchal regimes of Western societies and religions.”\textsuperscript{326}

Drawing on the earliest stories of an exodus community, Rosemary R. Ruether envisions the liberation of women through the formation of separated feminist liturgical communities. In \textit{Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities}, she argues that a church for the liberation of women is a church that is committed to overcoming patriarchal ecclesial structures constructed on the oppressive scheme of the powerful ruling the powerless. “The very concept of the Church as an exodus community from sin and evil, living in hope of redeemed humanity on a redeemed earth, implies the overcoming of patriarchy and its false

\textsuperscript{322} Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{In Memory of Her}, 344.

\textsuperscript{323} \textit{Lumen Gentium}, 9.

\textsuperscript{324} Fiorenza, \textit{In Memory of Her}, 344.

\textsuperscript{325} Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{But She Said}, 128.

\textsuperscript{326} Ibid., 129.
sacralization as the *ecclesia* of patriarchy.” Ruether concludes that whenever the cause for the liberation of women is present and the church is conceptualized as “an exodus community against structures of oppression…the seeds of women-church were present.”

Women-Church is not a separatist feminist movement, according to Ruether, but one that intends to remain in marginal relationship with the institutional church. For example, Women-Church runs “parallel structures on the edge of the mainstream of the church which ensure the spiritual survival within the patriarchal structures of the church.” The aim of Women-Church communities is not to separate from the institutional church (and the men who occupy hierarchical roles) but to create spaces that are free of patriarchal assumptions in order to practice as a gathered community in the process toward “a liberated co-humanity of both men and women.” Consequently, the movement’s strategy is to “defect in place,” creating “liberated zones” as a temporary stage only and to allow Women-Church to function in dialectic tension as a prophetic voice of critique from within the institution until the transformation of a patriarchal church is realized.

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328 Ibid., 64.


330 Ibid., 43.


332 Not all feminist theologians agree with Ruether’s expression of Women-Church as an exodus community. Schüssler Fiorenza discourages the widespread use of the exodus concept because she believes that “constructions of a liberated space, community, or religion of women tend to repress their own implication in patriarchal structures and mind-sets.” For Schüssler Fiorenza, while exodus base
Feminist and theological ethicist Mary E. Hunt is the co-founder and co-director of WATER, the Women’s Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual. Hunt’s academic career has been devoted to addressing women’s issues and human rights, internationally as well as in the U.S. While committed to work for change in the Catholic tradition, her theological formation has been largely ecumenical and “has never been limited to a rigid concept of church or ministry. Her expansive vision of church, her drive, and her unique perspective left her well positioned to step forward as a leader in this transitional period when feminists began to distance themselves from the institutional church.”

In addition to central leadership roles and conference presentations in Women’s Ordination Conference (WOC) and W-CC events, as a scholar and practitioner Hunt created ministerial strategies and practices for local Women-Church communities. Her work in the previously mentioned *Women-Church Sourcebook*, co-authored with Diann Neu, has served as a practical guide for those who seek to start a Women-Church group and as a liturgical resource providing templates for groups planning a gathering or Women-Church liturgy. Additionally, when written, the *Sourcebook* was an important resource for networking because it provided a list of established Women-Church groups. Today, Hunt’s work continues through the WATER organization, largely as a web presence: “WATER is a global network, an educational and spiritual space, a center for dialogue on feminism, faith, and justice. We connect activists, religious leaders, students, scholars, and allies who are using feminist religious values to create social change.”

The organization maintains much of the

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same mission over time: to provide informational materials that serve Women-Church groups, to encourage spirituality through liturgical and retreat resources, and to build relationships across the W-CC coalition and through mentoring younger scholars.

**An Alternative Form of Church: Birth of the Women-Church Movement**

The Women-Church movement emerged out of the early efforts of Roman Catholic women working for the reform of an all-male priesthood. In 1975 the first Women’s Ordination Conference was held in Detroit. Working against much ecclesiastical opposition to women’s ordination, their efforts exposed “symbolically and socially misogynist and hierarchical” barriers placed around traditional priesthood in the church. In the years that followed, however, it became apparent that women’s desire for ordination alongside of men in the institutional church was not the solution; rather, deep cultural and religious transformation was needed in the very institutions that defined priesthood and ordination. Feminist theologians understood that if the systemic structures and deeply ingrained symbols of a patriarchal church were to be overcome, comprehensive reform of the institutional church was needed.

Held in the city of Chicago in 1983 and sponsored by a coalition of feminist interest groups, the first Women-Church conference was called “Woman Church Speaks.” Ruether writes, the event “defined a new theological and practical standpoint that intend[ed] to claim the authentic theological ground of being church, and no longer to be defined by the ecclesia of patriarchy nor to ask for inclusion to ministry or for the right to experience sacramental life in its

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336 WOC continues its advocacy today describing itself as “the oldest and largest national organization that works to ordain women as priests, deacons and bishops into an inclusive and accountable Catholic church.” See http://www.womensordination.org/about-us/about-our-work (accessed November 30, 2015).
terms.” The gathering was largely comprised of Roman Catholic women, yet a small group of ordained Protestant women were present. Promoting recognition of the ecumenical nature of the gathering, Protestant clergy-women voiced their desire to be in solidarity with other women who were working toward structural change in a historically patriarchal church. A subsequent conference held in 1987 in Cincinnati, was “Women-Church: Claiming Our Power.” The change in the name from Woman-Church to the plural form, Women-Church, conveyed the group’s interest in including the growing diversity of women involved in the movement.

In addition to the Protestant group, the conference made contingencies for the inclusion of women across various racial, social, and economic groups. While Women-Church was criticized in the early years for primarily being of interest to white, middle-class, educated women, the movement has always strived to represent the diversity of all women’s experiences. For example, the conference provided both English and Spanish translation to facilitate exchanges among participants. Also, the conference made provisions for scholarships to economically-disadvantaged women so as to intentionally build a bridge between women from different socio-economic backgrounds. Ruether notes, “Thus it became dramatically clear that the communication between women across the divisions of class and race drawn by patriarchy is not insurmountable if women of resources reach across the divisions and provide the means, while, at the same time, really allowing the space for disenfranchised women to define their own experience.”

In the early 1980s, Center for Concern, a social justice organization in Washington, D.C., organized a national conference on behalf of Roman Catholic women and their efforts at

337 Ruether, Women-Church, 67.
338 Ibid., 68.
bringing structural transformation in the church. This conference was called “Women Moving Church” and marked a historical change in women’s consciousness. The aim of the conference is found in the 1982 proceedings:

We sought to design a feminist process…to embody the values feminists identify as alternatives to patriarchal structures. These values include community, mutuality, empowerment, wholeness, equality, participation and transformation. These values have the potential to negate the false myths which affect human interaction, namely privatism, hierarchical decision-making, domination, submission, dualism, passivity and co-optation.339

As a result, women began understanding themselves as essential agents of the church rather than mere attenders and recipients of male-centered religious goods. In the advent of the conference events and the shift in women’s consciousness, a new ecclesial form took shape and Women-Church in the U.S. was conceived as a feminist ecclesial movement.

While Women-Church began as a gathering of local base ecclesial communities, today the movement also exists as a collective organization at the national level. This coalition of almost thirty Women-Church groups is called Women-Church Convergence (W-CC) and functions as a network of feminist groups that share the mission to eradicate patriarchy and its structural injustices of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and violence against women and children. Meeting twice a year as a collective organization, representatives collaborate on educational tools, worship resources, and plans for community-focused events. The organizational structure of W-CC is comprised of two coordinators, which make up an executive committee, and provides leadership in the interim period between W-CC conference gatherings. A website is used to inform members about coalition-wide activities and events.340

339 Maria Riley and Diann Neu, eds., Women Moving Church (Washington, DC: Center of Concern, 1982), 1.

While the movement showed strong growth in the first two decades, the future outlook of W-CC and the Women-Church movement is dubious.\textsuperscript{341} Using conference attendance as an indicator of the movement’s sustainability, the dwindling numbers over time show signs of decline. For example, conferences in the 1980s and 1990s pulled thousands of attendees, and by the 2007 Conference, attendance was only 250.\textsuperscript{342}

\textit{The Task of Women-Church}

A vision of the transformation of oppressive structures in the church has been a key focus from the beginning of the Women-Church movement. “Women-church groups seek to change social structures and personal attitudes to stop oppression.”\textsuperscript{343} In eliminating oppression schemes in the church, three ongoing tasks have been identified: 1) re-creating of liturgy and myth making in the Christian tradition, 2) raising consciousness of the exclusion of women in the traditional concept of church, and 3) engagement of the ecclesial community in political activism and social transformation.\textsuperscript{344}

\textsuperscript{341} Mary E. Hunt, “Women-Church: Feminist Concept, Religious Commitment, Women’s Movement,” \textit{Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion} 25, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 97-98. Hunt outlines several “clues” that are stressing the future reality of the Women-Church movement. Some organizational limitations include the movement’s poorly defined leadership roles, a lack of feminist training in seminaries, and “little collective sense of size or reach, trajectory or accomplishments.” Hunt also identifies the confusion and inaccessibility caused by the language of feminist theology, such as kyriarchy, women-church, and discipleship of equals. (97) On the other hand, a concern more difficult to address is the mostly adult profile of the movement [and perhaps an older demographic?] with very few children indoctrinated in Women-Church ideology. “As such, the movement will die out in two generations unless explicit attention is paid to how children are received, socialized, and empowered in women-church.”


\textsuperscript{343} Neu and Hunt, \textit{Women-Church Sourcebook}, 3.

Feminist scholar Mary Fainsod Katzenstein, however, suggests that the function of Women-Church is more than grassroots activism and structural reform of patriarchy in the church. The movement serves as the *ideological* feminist consciousness within the institutional Catholic Church. Its purpose, according to Katzenstein, is primarily to advocate for reconstructed definitions and roles of women in the church through “[a] narrative of conferences and workshops, an account of *ideas* rather than *policies*.”345 In other words, the movement engages in “discursive politics” as a type of rhetorical activism that “intend[s] to challenge deeply held beliefs” such as social norms and customs; it is a method employed by feminist interest groups that “challenges the way people write and talk about these beliefs.”346 Because feminist activist groups primarily focus their time and energy toward “reflection and deliberation, in constructing new words, language, and meaning to describe their changing understanding of women and the Church,”347 the Women-Church movement is interpreted less as an organization and more as a form of activism for the transformation of social ideologies and ecclesial norms. Katzenstein draws the conclusion that Women-Church answered the need for women in the church to reconstruct the historical norms of the language of exclusion. As such, the success of the movement has been in providing “a home and identity within Catholicism”348 for those who had been alienated from its institutional practices and ecclesial community because on their gender.


346 Ibid., 40.

347 Ibid.

348 Ibid., 41.
FACTORS IN THE EMERGENCE OF WOMEN-CHURCH

First Contextual Factor: A Feminist Consciousness

In 1985 Rosemary Radford Ruether wrote *Women-Church* in the midst of what she calls “a crisis and transmutation of religion in Western Europe and North America.” It is a crisis of religious authority indicative of the secularization of an aging western society and the encroaching irrelevance of religion in modern society. She identifies three responses intended to counter the invasive secularization of western society: a biblical-centered response from conservative Christians aimed to counter the rampant excesses of modernity, the emergence of liberation theology in Latin America that generated a grassroots political response against western modern economic systems and the creation of systemic poverty and oppression, and the rise of feminist theology in resisting patriarchal and oppressive schemes found in secular social norms as well as those adopted by the religious institutions of modern western society. Ruether asserts that unlike the other two responses to secularization, feminist theology not only resists the breakdown of systemic political injustice in modern secular societies but also works at the most systemic levels of injustices found in sexism, racism, classicism, and all exploited relationships of the created world. The “feminist religious revolution” strives toward the renewal of relationships across all chasms of disordered relations.

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350 Ruether conceives the process of secularization of western society as the demise of religion as a “teacher and shaper of the symbolic universe of meaning” that is felt across all major religions, especially Christianity. Religion is replaced by the modern perception of scientific knowledge that frees humanity from the bondage of religious authority. Ruether, *Women-Church*, 1.

351 Ibid., 1-3.
Feminist movements in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries exposed the patriarchal ideology pervasive not only in society, but also in the Christian church as well. The work of feminist theologians revealed social structures of domination that informed social and ecclesial norms. Patriarchy, according to Schüssler Fiorenza, is the “multiplicative interstructuring of the pyramidal hierarchical structures of ruling.”\(^{352}\) It organizes the people of God into a “complex pyramidal political structure of dominance and subordination, stratified by gender, race, class, religious and cultural taxonomies and other historical formations of domination.”\(^{353}\)

In her seminal work of feminist theology in the late 1960s, *The Church and the Second Sex*, Mary Daly contended that the church has been culpable in perpetuating systemic patriarchal relations. It has reinforced patriarchal patterns in the theologies and structures used to govern the Christian church. The early church was birthed in a social context that for thousands of years had been “ordered in hierarchical patterns…master and slave, feudal lord and serf, husband and wife—all lived out their existence in fixed roles…. The fundamental dialectic was between oppressor and oppressed.”\(^{354}\) She concluded that the “hierarchical vision of the world was reflected in the structures of the church and justified by her theology.”\(^{355}\)

The church remains one of the few institutions operating under an old social order predicated on a model of domination. For feminist theologians, disordered social structures must be dismantled if the church is to come under Jesus’ teaching and vision for right relations. At a

\(^{352}\) Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 115.

\(^{353}\) Ibid.


\(^{355}\) Ibid.
conference presentation given in 1983, Ruether articulated a call to the church to envision a new social order free of oppressive mechanisms and schemes:

We call our brothers to join us in exodus from the land of patriarchy, to join us in our common quest for that promised land where there will be no more war, no more burning children, no more violated women, no more discarded elderly, no more rape of the earth. Together, let us break up that great idol and grind it into powder; dismantle the great Leviathan of violence and misery who threatens to destroy the earth, plow it into the soil, and transform it back into the means of peace and plenty, so that all the children of earth can sit down together at the banquet of life.\textsuperscript{356}

\textit{Second Contextual Factor: The Inclusive Church of Vatican II}

The second contextual factor that contributed to the emergence of Women-Church is the Second Vatican Council’s vision for a communal-participatory ecclesial model supported by the governing image of the People of God:

“I will be their God, and they shall be my people...for they shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord” (Jer 31, 31-34). This is the new covenant that Christ instituted, the new testament in his blood (see 1 Cor 11, 25), calling together from Jews and gentiles a people which would be bound together in unity not according to the flesh but in the Spirit, and which would be the new people of God…. they have been finally set up as “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people...once no people but now God’s people” (1Pt 2, 9-10).\textsuperscript{357}

Hines reports, “Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, \textit{Lumen Gentium}, indicated with these images a major shift in the understanding of the church, even in its very construction.”\textsuperscript{358} The Council, in returning to the biblical accounts of the early church, recovered a model of ecclesiology that had been increasingly obscured by the prevailing institutional model, the church as “a perfect society,” as conceived by Robert Bellarmine. In the polemical

\textsuperscript{356} Ruether, \textit{Women-Church}, 73-74.


\textsuperscript{358} Hines, “Community for Liberation,” 162.
context of the sixteenth century Reformation(s), Bellarmine’s ecclesiology defined the church primarily through its visible top-down structure and the centralized ecclesial authority granted to the hierarchy.\textsuperscript{359} The emphasis on the visible structures and on the role authority of the officers served to counter the claims of the Reformers, however, the tactic came at the expense of the laity’s self-identification with the church. In retrieving biblical images such as the people of God, the body of Christ, and a pilgrim people, it catalyzed a shift in emphasis on the inclusive nature of all baptized members of the church. Consequently, in the early chapters of \textit{Lumen Gentium}, the Council established that the church is more than the hierarchy; it is whole church, the people of God.\textsuperscript{360}

Feminist theologians interpret the Council’s ecclesiology to mean that women who have “reclaimed [their] baptismal call to the discipleship of equals”\textsuperscript{361} are full participants in the church. Schüssler Fiorenza asserts, “Insofar as Vatican II elaborated the collegial and familial ‘brotherhood’ dimension of the church, it sought to transform the patriarchal model of church.”\textsuperscript{362} She adopted the designation, the “participatory-inclusive Catholic (not Greco-Roman) model of church.”\textsuperscript{363} The radical inclusion brought into effect by baptismal vows extends beyond any notion of a privileged status of ordination, and therefore, qualifies the entire

\textsuperscript{359} I return to this theme more fully in chapter five to address the development of the centralization of governing structures which climaxed at the First Vatican Council.

\textsuperscript{360} \textit{Lumen Gentium}, 9; theologians note that the placement of chapter two, “On the People of God” prior to chapter three, “On the Hierarchical Structure of the Church,” indicated the Council’s desire to re-establish the identity of the church member through baptism rather than ordination.

\textsuperscript{361} Fiorenza, \textit{In Memory of Her}, 344.


\textsuperscript{363} Ibid.
people of God to participate in the ministry and mission of the church, regardless of gender.

Hines clarifies women’s expectations in the wake of Vatican II:

The laity, and particularly women, began to believe and act on the conviction that “we are the church.” This belief, joined with the reawakening of feminism in the 1960s, has led women to expect and demand full participation in all aspects of the church’s life, particularly in areas of ministry and moral decision making where their experience has been most excluded but where decisions affect their lives dramatically. 364

While the ecclesial reforms of Vatican II seemingly played an important role in the theological development of the Women-Church movement, Natalie Knödel comments that Ruether is less convinced of the Council’s impact on the emergence of the Women-Church movement. Though the momentum of feminist theology and the subsequent impact of the Women-Church movement are founded in the ecclesial reforms of Vatican II, Ruether suggests that other concurrent cultural factors must be taken into account. The “[Second Vatican Council] should not without reluctance be classed as crucially influential for the development of women-church without taking into account other factors like the women’s movement and the civil rights movement.” 365

Regardless of Ruether’s position of reluctance, theologians credit the Council for establishing a theology of the people of God and the fundamentally equal status of all baptized members. Nevertheless, they critique its failure to implement a strategy that could have reformed ecclesial structures and aligned ecclesial practices with the vision of communion ecclesiology. As a result, structures that produce egalitarian brother-sister relations, shared responsibility of the church’s mission, and collegial governing practices are still needed.


Third Contextual Factor: Ecclesial Communities Model

Feminist theologians rejected the hierarchical structure of the church as normative and adopted a participatory and basic community model like that of liberation theology. As described in chapter three, liberation theologians in Latin America critiqued the institutional church’s centralization of power and sought new ecclesial forms that redistributed sacred power across the whole people of God. Feminist liberation theologian Elsa Tamez notes that in an ecclesiology of liberation, the base ecclesial community form is a critique of “church that gives privilege to power concentrated in hierarchy instead of privileging charism.” Consequently, the decentralized local structure of base ecclesial communities facilitated concrete action and the mission of liberation theology.

Base units of the church became the most effective structural expression of the Latin American church and afforded the laity the opportunity to be participants and agents in their liberation from oppressive social conditions. As a result, theological reflection could be wed to concrete political and social activism; “[b]asic Christian communities are thus the ecclesial expression of liberation theology.” For the same reason, Women-Church adopted the ecclesial

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367 While women continue to struggle for liberation in Latin America, socially, culturally, as well as ecclesially into roles in church life, theologians report that more than half of the pastoral coordinators and agents in Latin American BECs are women (see interviews in Tamez). Elsa Tamez conducted interviews with fifteen Latin American men (mostly well know scholars) involved in the task of liberation theology, and in highlighting one of several important conclusions she states, “Notwithstanding this challenge [of rejection of women from the priestly role] that we will one day have to confront, we want to emphasize and encourage the great opening that exists for women in the basic Christian communities, a truly epoch-making phenomenon that will be the point of departure for the renewal of the official institutional church. On this we agree with Pablo Richard when he says that women play an extremely important role in the change of models of the church: from a Christendom model to the church born of the people.” Elsa Tamez, Against Machismo, trans. of Teólogos de la liberación hablan sobre la mujer, (Oak Park, IL: Meyer Stone Books, 1987), 140.

368 Ibid., 25.
base community model as an inclusive, communitarian form of church that was functionally capable not only of communal theological reflection but concrete action to effect change within their immediate contexts. In its commitment to achieve ecclesial renewal and liberation from patriarchal structures, Women-Church base communities provide a structural vehicle for the movement to carry out a mission of liberation.

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF A RADICAL DEMOCRATIC MODEL

Schüssler Fiorenza undertook the theological task of reimagining an ecclesial structure that reflected the inclusive nature of the Women-Church movement. Her insight as a feminist biblical scholar shed new light on an interpretation of the social gathering of the early church, the ekklēsia, as a democratic and egalitarian assembly of Christians free of any patriarchal notions of social order. Her understanding of the church as a discipleship of equals, anchored in the biblical text and the memory of Jesus, makes her decentralized model particularly useful for a study of ecclesial structures that both adapt to social conditions yet also are anchored in the Christian theological tradition.

The Distortion of Structural Exclusion

Schüssler Fiorenza explores the impact of patriarchal democratic forms in antiquity on modern Western democracy and the church’s historical adaptation of its ecclesial structures. Inherent in the ancient democratic social structures was a contradiction between the claim to full equality for all citizens and the social subordination of certain citizens. Greco-Roman models, in theory, granted equality to all citizens of the polis, with equality of rights, of speech, and of power. The exercise of this freedom came through the assembly of all free citizens, called the ekklēsia, for deliberation and decision-making in pursuit of the common welfare of the polis. Freedom in the democratic government, however, was littered with restrictions based upon such
criteria as citizenship, slavery, wealth, and gender. Schüssler Fiorenza concludes, “Actual participation in government remained conditional not only upon citizenship but also upon the combined privileges of property, education, and family status as a freeborn male.”

The contradiction between the theory of a democratic vision and the socio-political realities has perpetuated what Schüssler Fiorenza calls a kyriocentric, or “master-centered” logic, and justifies the restriction of free participation based on natural differences “between elite men and women, between freeborn and slaves, between property owners and farmers or artisans, between Athenian-born citizens and other residents, between Greeks and Barbarians, between the civilized and the uncivilized world.” Schüssler Fiorenza provides a diagram of the socio-political relationships of the Greek city-state and the inherent inequality of a patriarchal democracy:

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369 Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, 119.

370 Ibid., 120.
In practice, governance by a Greek democratic model elevated the Greek free-born male to a privileged citizen and positioned him at the center of society. Others, including free Greek women, unfree servants, and those considered “uncultured barbarians” and “uncivilized savages” were less than full citizens. In such a socio-political system, the impact on the household code

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372 Ibid., 116.
placed the male as the head, or ruler, over all who were subordinate to his positional status and granted him legal rights over the wife, children, and other blood-relatives, as well as household servants and slaves.

A distorted relational dependency of power structures is created in a system of patriarchal rule. Schüssler Fiorenza notes that a social system of “kyriarchy,” rule by a master or lord, creates a power differential in which “the structuring dividing lines run between those men who own property and those women and men who are owned, between those who rule and those who are ruled, between those who as superiors command and those who as subordinates obey, between those who are free from manual labor and have leisure for philosophical and political activity and those who are economically dependent and whose labor is exploited.”

The term kyriarchy is an effective neologism constructed by Schüssler Fiorenza to convey the scope of a flawed ecclesial system that extends beyond traditional patriarchal and androcentric notions. According to Schüssler Fiorenza, the relational distortion is greater than gender inequality; the church is constructed upon a hierarchical system created by interlocking structures that reinforce social oppression and inequality, including the pervasive practices of sexism as well as social oppressions such as classism, heterosexism, colonialism and racism. The patriarchal paradigm, Schüssler Fiorenza writes, “is a complex pyramidal political structure of dominance and subordination, stratified by gender, race, class, religious and cultural taxonomies and other historical formations of domination.” A social structure of the powerful and the oppressed is the intended structural outcome in a patriarchal model. Schüssler Fiorenza’s construction of kyriarchy, i.e. lordship \([\text{kyrio} \text{ (lord)} + \text{archein} \text{ (ruled over)}]\), assumes a power

373 Ibid., 116-117.
374 Ibid., 115.
differential as normative between master and servant, and effectively constructs a hierarchical structure on which individuals are placed in privileged or subordinate positions above or below one another based on social constructions. As an ecclesial example, a kyriarchal model of ministry reinforces the clerical system marked by male-only ordination and the imparting of sacramental power to the privileged elect (historically, the white male); therefore, a power caste is created separating those with divine power and agency from those without power.

Schüssler Fiorenza’s Assessment: An Egalitarian Ekklēsia Obscured by Kyriarchy

Ekklēsia was a term adopted by the church from civic life in the first century. The Greco-Roman city-state carried a civic and political dimension that directly correlated with a radical democratic model of the ancient polis. In the city-state, the ekklēsia was the public assembly of free male citizens engaged in decision-making. Schüssler Fiorenza defines the term as the “assembly of free citizens gathering for deciding their own spiritual-political affairs.” In the adaptation for use in the early church, the word conveyed a notion of ekklēsia as the inclusive, democratic assembly by which decisions are made for the good of the entire ecclesial community. As in the civic model, however, the historical development of the church rendered women as less than equal as decision-making participants of the ekklēsia. Schüssler Fiorenza identifies a key factor that has led to the conflicting models in the course of church history. It lies in the translation of the word for “church” in which the concept of the ekklēsia was obscured by the dominant social norm of kyriarchy adopted from ancient Greek models. She elaborates:

375 Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 344.

[The] tension between the democratic-charismatic and the patriarchal-hierarchal models of church comes to the fore in the linguistic notion of the word “church.” The Greek word *ekklēsia* is translated as “church,” although the English word “church” derives from the Greek word *kyriake*, i.e., belonging to the Lord/Master. However, the original meaning of *ekklēsia* would be best rendered as “public assembly of the political community” or “democratic assembly of full citizens.”

*Christianity Birthed in a Patriarchal Culture: A Counter Ethos*

In such a political and social milieu within the apostolic period of the church, the ancient Greco-Roman model of governance and power influenced the first-century authors of the Christian scriptures. Schüssler Fiorenza states, “The so-called household-code texts, which demand subordination and obedience from wives, children, and slaves, participate in this stabilizing reception of patriarchal political philosophy in the first centuries of our era.” She notes that in the First Epistle of Peter, the patriarchal patterns are demonstrated in the subordination of wives to husbands, slaves to master, and Christians to the Roman Emperor. Further, Schüssler Fiorenza insists that the same patriarchal model later influences the structure of the church, asserting, “The post-Constantinian ancient church most closely resembles the Roman imperial pyramid” as a form of patriarchal rule. “Such a contradiction between the call to discipleship of equals and patriarchal ecclesial structures was introduced toward the end of the first century in the process of ecclesial adaptation to Greco-Roman society and culture.”

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377 Ibid.


379 Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 118.

The early Christian communities called to an egalitarian-shaped structure stood in conflict with that of the Greco-Roman cultural norms. Schüssler Fiorenza interprets the conflict as a “struggle between the emerging Christian movement and its vision of equality and freedom, on the one hand, and the hegemonic patriarchal ethos of the Greco-Roman world on the other. In this struggle, the ecclesial leadership of freeborn women and slaves (women and men) in the ἐκκλησία as a charismatic democracy was submerged again, transformed or pushed to the fringes of mainstream churches.” She continues, stating that “[t]he model of historical reconstruction suggested here is that of social interaction and religious transformation, of struggle between ἐκκλησία as the discipleship of equals and church as the patriarchal household of G-d promulgating the ‘politics’ of subordination and domination in Western societies.” A diagram representative of the development of a patriarchal model of church is below:

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381 John N. Collins, in “A Critique of Feminist Ekklesia-ology,” New Theology Review 12, no. 3 (2013), claims that Schüssler Fiorenza’s interpretation of service/diakonia and ministry in the early church is not substantiated in the ancient sources (Collins 1990, 1992). For example, her use of terms such as democratic, egalitarian, and even Discipleship of Equals “imports into the discipleship another set of political values—democracy, decision-making assembly—which is as alien to the basileia of the Jesus movement as domination and oppression.” (Collins 2013, 55) Collins’ critique of Schüssler Fiorenza’s interpretation stems from his view that the Gospel is not political in any way; therefore, the ecclesial community is to reject any imposition of political interpretation or praxis in the text, including Schüssler Fiorenza conceiving the early church as a democratic ecclesial community. “The teachings [of Jesus] are saying that the basileia does not operate by politics of any kind and that it only begins to operate when politics is left outside. Only then is the individual exposed purely to the workings of his or her response to the gospel message.”


383 Ibid.

384 Ibid., 23.
The church developed as an adaptation of the kyriarchal Roman church; therefore, “[t]his church is characterized by hierarchical structures, represented by men, and divided into a sacred two-class system of the ordained and the laity…. Because of their gender wo/men are always laity. ‘Laywo/man’ is a pejorative and derogatory term connoting second-class citizenship.”

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385 Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship of Equals, 226.

By the fourth century, the memory of an egalitarian church had been forgotten. Any freedom that women assumed in the ministry of the church was rejected as unorthodox and was forbidden under the reign of male clergy functioning under a patriarchal rule. The church took up the model of the Greco-Roman world, and according to Ruether, “Bishops came to be seen as like governors of Roman cities and provinces. Women continued to be given minor ministries of service in local churches as deaconesses and members of orders of virgins and widows in the sixth century, but major ordained roles of priests and bishops, increasingly associated with celibacy, were reserved for men.”

In *Women-Church: Theology and Practice*, Ruether summarizes the historical development of the church’s hierarchal, gender-dependent structure:

> In the official clerical mythology, an ordained priesthood is declared to have been established by Christ (as representative of God), who founded a hierarchy to pass down this divine power in a line of succession. Bishops dispense divine power to priests, and priests, in turn, dispense forgiveness, truth, and divine life to the laity, if the laity submits to the rules laid down by the hierarchy. In this way the entire teaching and sacramental life of the Church is turned into a power tool of the clergy over the people.

**Women-Church as Radical Democratic Ecclesial Model**

Schüssler Fiorenza’s model of full democracy envisions a people governed by a biblical ideal of equality and equal access across all realms of ecclesial life. Ecclesial norms and practices are characterized by mutuality, inclusiveness, participation, and diversity. Leadership is shared; those with the capacity to lead are appointed and leadership is exercised as a service for others. A proposed alternative ecclesial structure is in Diagram 3.3 below:

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388 Ruether, *Women-Church*, 75.
A Pauline Alternative: Dismantling Paterfamilias

Drawing from Pauline writings, Schüssler Fiorenza re-imagines a new family metaphor as the central paradigm for ecclesial relationships that dismantles notions of *paterfamilias*, or the norm of male as head-of-household. In this new community of disciples, the patriarchal household codes are turned on their head. Rather than the elevation of the father or master of the household, in the new community “the child/slave who occupies the lowest place within

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patriarchal structures becomes the primary paradigm for the true discipleship-community.”

Based on Romans 8:14-17, membership in the community is a call to a new, inclusive and equal family circle. The Christian community calls God their father (*abba*), but the sentiment is as a child calling to a family member in a nurturing, paternal or maternal manner rather than as a slave addressing his master. Members of God’s family are co-heirs with Christ, are adopted into God’s family and call each other brothers and sisters. In Schüssler Fiorenza’s model, as is typical of the behavior patterns of siblings, brothers and sisters share meals together and approach one another with gestures typified by those on equal social standings, e.g., “greet each other with a holy kiss.” Therefore, Christian “conversion makes slaves…into ‘beloved family members’ not only in an ecclesial context but also in everyday social interaction within the house-church.”

Discipleship in the Jesus-movement requires a re-prioritization of the old order of family relations; a new family order waits for those who relinquish the socio-cultural norms of natural kinship. “Rather than reproducing the patriarchal relationships of the ‘household’ in antiquity,

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390 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 220.

391 Romans 8:14-17 (NRSV): For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

392 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 221.

393 This mutual gesture is mentioned five times in the New Testament: 1 Cor 16:20, 2 Cor 13:12, Rom 16:16, 1 Pet 5:14, and 1 Thes 5:26.

394 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 221.

395 Schüssler Fiorenza references Mark 3:31-35 in which Jesus proclaims a new kind of family tie with non-blood relatives, i.e., those gathered around him “inside” the house in contrast to his natural kin who were calling to him from outside the house. Again, in Mark 13:12 Schüssler Fiorenza has Jesus
the Jesus-movement demands a radical break with them.”396 Fathers as heads of households, according to Schüssler Fiorenza, have no place in the new vision of the family of equal disciples because in the social order of antiquity, fathers carried the notion of the paterfamilias—the one with power and status over one without power and status. In Christian community, patriarchal fathers, bound to the paradigm of domination and subordination relations, must not exist.

In addition, Christian conversion from Judaism in the first-century early church creates a break in continuity of an inherited privileged status in the patriarchal social order. Baptism, on the other hand, as the initiation ritual and new family tie into the Christian community, creates a wide and inclusive membership in the Jesus-movement.397 “In baptism converts enter into a new kinship relationship with people coming from very different religious, cultural, and social backgrounds and patriarchal relationships. These former status differences are not to determine the social and religious structures of the new community.”398 For example, titles that reinforce the patriarchal household social orders are rejected in a community of equals, including even that of a teacher functioning in a hierarchical role in a community.399 “Structures of domination should not be tolerated in the discipleship-community of Jesus, but those who would be great or teaching Peter that persecutions will come because of the kinship with this new community and it will most likely come from those members of the natural family.

396 Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship of Equals, 220.

397 This is in contrast to the Old Testament religious rite of circumcision as a gender-specific symbol of membership.

398 Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship of Equals, 222.

399 Schüssler Fiorenza may be making a reference to Matthew 23:8 which states, “As for you, do not be called ‘Rabbi.’ You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers.” In this chapter Jesus instructs his disciples that the “greatest among you must be your servant” and denounces the Pharisees and scribes for the burdens they place on others because of their abuse of spiritual authority. In the same chapter Jesus also commands to let no one call you “master” and call no one on earth “father.”
first among the disciples must be servants/slaves of all.”

Schüssler Fiorenza continues, suggesting that the social dismantling of privileged structures also impacted the converts in the early church.

Since social-patriarchal privileges in antiquity also implied religious privileges, conversion of freeborn elite men to the Christian movement meant relinquishing their religious prerogatives based on their social status in the patriarchal household of antiquity. Because they accepted persons as full members irrespective of their patriarchal status and because they rejected patriarchal prerogatives and power, the early Christian missionary movements stood in tension with the dominant Greco-Roman society.

ANCHORED BY HAITHT’S CRITERIA FOR ECCLESIAL STRUCTURE

As a decentralized movement, free from the hierarchical stability of the institution, what holds Women-Church together as a local and networked ecclesial movement as well as anchors it within the larger framework of the Christian tradition? Roger Haight’s principle of functionality for ecclesial structures is used to identify the movement’s prioritization of certain values, and therefore, to establish the criteria that anchors Women-Church to the wider Christian church. As such, Schüssler Fiorenza’s model of the ekklēsia of women is assessed for alignment with three criteria, which include embodying the life and ministry of Jesus, nurturing a Spirit-filled community, and promoting the shared responsibility of mission across the entire people of God.

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400 Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship of Equals, 221.

401 Ibid.; She references the biblical passage, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, there is neither free nor slave person, there is not male and female; for you are all one is Christ Jesus.” Schüssler Fiorenza clarifies: “Therefore, Galatians 3:28c probably asserts that marriage and family status are no longer constitutive for the new community in Christ. Irrespective of their marriage or household status, persons are full members of the Christian movement in and through baptism.”
First Norm: The Dangerous Memory of an Egalitarian Commonwealth

First, does the decentralized structure of Women-Church in Schüssler Fiorenza’s radical democratic model meet Haight’s norm for embodying the core values in the teaching and ministry of Jesus? Evidence of the early church’s vision of a democratic model is found in the accounts of Jesus described by the New Testament writers. The followers of Jesus proclaimed the message of the *basileia*, the reign of God; as a message that stood in contrast to the ancient culture. It was a message of “an alternative vision to the imperial utopia of Rome” and was welcomed by those who were considered the lowest class of citizens. The *basileia* message was countercultural to the surrounding patriarchal Greek model of democracy that marked social boundaries of exclusion and inclusion.

Schüssler Fiorenza suggests that Jesus’ announcement of the reign of God held political overtones that called for values of equality and radical inclusion while rejecting societal norms marked by subordination and domination. While Jesus’ message was an anticipation of the reign of God, it was also “an anti-imperial political symbol that appealed to the oppositional imagination of the Jewish people victimized by the Roman imperial system. The Gospel of the *basileia* envisioned an alternative world free of hunger, poverty, and domination.” Schüssler Fiorenza asserts that Jesus’ proclamation that the kingdom has come and was among them was embodied in the immediate liberation and salvation he offered. *Basileia* “was already present in the healing and liberating practices of the Jesus movement, in its inclusive table-community, as well as in the domination-free kinship relations among the disciples.”

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403 Ibid., 27.
404 Ibid.
Schüssler Fiorenza’s vision of radical inclusion is a sign of the reign of God. In the nascent Christian church, “[w]holeness and inclusiveness [were] the distinguishing marks of the Jesus-movement”; the distinctive ideals reflected Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom of God. According to Schüssler Fiorenza, the “inclusive character of the Jesus-movements allowed women as well as men, poor as well as rich, cultically unclean as well as strict observers of the Torah to become followers of Jesus.” The vision of the basileia is “realized again and again in the democratic practices of the ekklēśia…. The democratic construction of the early Christian communal self-understanding is not simply a given fact nor just an ideal. Rather it is an active process moving toward great equality, freedom, and responsibility, as well as toward communal relations free of domination.

Additionally, Schüssler Fiorenza draws from the Gospel tradition to summarize Jesus’ teaching on the exercise of power: “Structures of domination and servanthood should not be tolerated in the community of equals.” In Mark 10:42-44, the call for a different relational orientation is evident in Jesus’ reversal of what it means to be the greatest: “[B]ut whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.” Schüssler Fiorenza further elucidates, noting that in a society that gives power and authority to kings and those of great positions, “It challenges those in positions of dominance and

405 Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship of Equals, 220.
406 Ibid.
408 Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship of Equals, 305.
power to become ‘equal’ to those who are powerless. Masters should relinquish domination over their slaves and servants and step into their shoes.”

The problem with hierarchical structures lies not only in the exclusion of women from church, leadership, and participatory roles, but that “[t]he struggles against religious-ecclesial patriarchy are at the heart of societal liberation struggles against racism, colonialism, militarism, or poverty, and vice-versa.”

A patriarchal system is marked by an unjust exercise of power:

[P]atriarchal power as the power of the master and lord operates not only along the axis of the gender system but also along those of race, class, culture, and religion. These axes of power structure the more general, overarching system of domination in a matrix- (or better patrix-) like fashion. When one shifts the analysis for investigating the axes of power along which this patrix of domination is structured, one can see not only how these systems of oppression constitute the kyriarchal social pyramid, but also how they criss-cross the identity positions offered to individuals by the politics of domination.

Authority in the Jesus tradition is not to be exercised as power to bring another into subordination. Moreover, ecclesial authority is not to be claimed by any privileged class as in father, lord, or master; both women and men are vessels of the authority and power of the Gospel tradition. As taught by and demonstrated by Jesus, authorization to exercise power is in service to and for liberation of “those dominated and dehumanized by evil powers.”

Those with power are responsible to use it in service for others. Jesus’ call to become a servant is intended for those who “have status and power in the societal or ecclesial patriarchal pyramid.” Power holders are called to move to lower tiers of the social pyramid and to join the

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409 Ibid.
410 Ibid., 228.
411 Ibid., 365-366.
412 Ibid., 247.
413 Ibid., 305.
servant class; therefore, it “rejects the patriarchal-hierarchal pyramid…. denying the validity of the positions of master and lord.”

Schüssler Fiorenza concludes that the tradition of Jesus dismisses the tier-schema of the patriarchal structure and calls for a praxis of equality with the lowest classes.

Schüssler Fiorenza’s emphasis on the early church’s vision of a democratic model as evident in the accounts of Jesus, and particularly in Jesus’ teaching on the Kingdom of God, meets Haight’s criteria. Jesus’ message stood counter to the patriarchal first-century society and his ministry and teaching resembled an egalitarian community of followers whose relationship was familial in nature. As such, the community was a gathered discipleship of equals. Schüssler Fiorenza writes, “Scripture allows us to glimpse the ‘dangerous memory’ of a movement and community of radical equality in the power of the Spirit.”

**Second Norm: Ekklēsia and Community**

Haight’s second norm assesses the capacity to nurture a communitarian spirit in faith and love by the presence of the Spirit. In Schüssler Fiorenza’s democratic model, *ekklēsia* conveys the notion of the gathering of a dynamic Christian community. The principle of *ekklēsia*, understood as such, is not static in practice; it conveys the notion of a perpetual dynamic of an actual assembly of members that seeks the well-being of the whole community.

For women, the poor, or the marginalized to be excluded from the experience of the assembly is to forsake the essence of *ekklēsia*.

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414 Ibid.


416 Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 345.
Schüssler Fiorenza links the concept of *ekklēsia* with the call of the Gospel to live in Christian community. She notes that the draw to communal ties with the ecclesial community was imperative to the early Christian experience. Community was “a set of relationships: the experience of God’s presence among one another and through one another. To embrace the Gospel means to enter into a community, the one cannot be obtained without the other. The Gospel calls into being the church as the discipleship of equals that is continually recreated in the power of the Spirit.”\(^{417}\) Moreover, Schüssler Fiorenza asserts that the Gospel necessitates the adherence of oneself to the community and to the common mission of those who gather in Christ’s name. She writes, “To embrace the gospel means to enter into a movement, to become a member of God’s people who are on the road that stretches from Christ’s death to Her return in glory.”\(^{418}\) In community, the church seeks to move together in a common purpose and mission.

Finally, in a model of discipleship of equals the *ekklēsia* gathers around a common and equal table. The practice of sharing a common table fosters a communitarian spirit. The *ekklēsia* practices “eating together, sharing together, drinking together, talking with each other, receiving each other, experiencing God’s presence through each other, and, in doing so, proclaiming the gospel as God’s alternative vision for everyone, especially for those who are poor, outcast, and battered.”\(^{419}\) Schüssler Fiorenza’s democratic *ekklēsia* model achieves Haight’s second norm of nurturing a communitarian spirit.

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\(^{417}\) Ibid.

\(^{418}\) Ibid.

\(^{419}\) Ibid.
**Third Norm: A Body Politic**

Haight’s final criterion assesses the capacity of Women-Church to promote shared responsibility for the mission of the church. For Schüssler Fiorenza, “Ministry is a function of the whole church vis-à-vis the whole world.”\footnote{420} Foundationally the basis of inclusion and participation is baptism and not ordination. It is a communal-participatory model reclaimed by Vatican II that calls all the baptized to the responsibility of ministry. She writes, “It is not a prerogative or privilege of a clerical class or the male sex, but is rooted in the baptism of all believers.”\footnote{421}

Schüssler Fiorenza reveals “a dangerous memory” in the Pauline letters of a democratic vision and reflects the ideal of radical inclusion of the early Christian communities. Her work renders a political interpretation of the Pauline metaphor of the body of Christ, most notably from the First Letter to the Corinthians. The body, or *soma*, language, when placed in the political context of the Greco-Roman *polis*, is to be understood as the social and political structural arrangement of members that are interdependent upon one another—as in the Greco-Roman political city-state. This is significant to Schüssler Fiorenza because it demonstrates the equal and shared nature of the responsibilities of the *ekklēsia*. To be the *soma*, or the body of Christ, was to be “in Christ” together, and as such meant that all were given equal access to the gifts of the Spirit. She renders a fresh hearing of the familiar passage describing those who are members of the body as of equal status and of one corporate body:

> For just as the *soma* is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one *soma*, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized

\footnote{420} Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 228.

\footnote{421} Ibid.
into one *soma*—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free [both women and men]—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Cor 12:12-13)\(^{422}\)

In this structural arrangement, while all had equal access to the same Spirit, the gifts and abilities were diverse and distributed among individual members; all were equal yet not the same. The socio-religious norm was dismantled, and therefore, no social classifications of inequality existed in the body of Christ. Schüssler Fiorenza extrapolates the “body” principle to include leadership roles in the community. “No one can claim to have a superior function because all functions are necessary and must be equally honored for the building up of the ‘corporation’—or soma.”\(^{423}\) Leadership is alternating and shared among the community.

In addition, the earliest Christian community did not adopt patterns according to the patriarchal household hierarchy. The gatherings of small house-churches provided a place for the ecclesial community to exercise charismatic democracy freely and to practice shared leadership and preaching. Partaking in the Eucharist was a radically inclusive privilege of all members of the *ekklēsia*—regardless of economic situation, enslavement, gender, or ethnicity. Baptism, not social or political status, was the mark of inclusion and solidarity: “Baptism is the sacrament that calls us into the discipleship of equals. No special vocation is given, no more ‘perfect’ Christian lifestyle is possible.”\(^{424}\)

In summary, through the use of Haight’s criteria for ecclesial structures, the decentralized ecclesial structure as envisioned by Schüssler Fiorenza and practiced in the typical Women-


\(^{423}\) Ibid.

\(^{424}\) Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 344.
Church gathering demonstrates the capacity to actualize the memory of Jesus, to nurture a
communitarian spirit, and to ensure the shared responsibility of the mission of the church.

ANOMALIES: INCONSISTENCIES IN THE WOMEN-CHURCH MODEL

The Ambiguity of Radical Inclusion

While the aim of the Women-Church movement is a community of radical inclusion, in
reality the relationship of the members with the hierarchical church is intentionally ambiguous.
In the process of liberation from patriarchy, the relationship between the movement and the
institutional church must be reassessed. Ruether proposes that “for most Christians the only
alternative is to turn to the creation of autonomous feminist base communities as the vehicle for
developing a community of liberation from sexism.”[425]

For some feminist theologians, autonomous, all-women gatherings are a necessary stage
in the process of the church breaking from a patriarchal paradigm. For Ruether, the Women-
Church movement is one stage in raising a feminist consciousness in the church, a stage that is a
“collectivization of women’s experience and the formation of critical culture.”[426] While a
separated phase is necessary, it is not an ideological separation; it is not a permanent solution.
She writes, “We are not talking here about separatism as total ideology, but as a stage in a
process, a stage that is absolutely necessary but not an end in itself, a stage toward a further end
in the formation of a critical culture and community of women and men in exodus from
patriarchy.”[427] The ultimate aim is the creation of a new community of women and men
flourishing as a whole people liberated from patriarchy.

[425] Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 205.
[426] Ruether, Women-Church, 61.
[427] Ibid., 60.
Ruether believes that “[w]omen have to withdraw from male-dominated spaces so they can gather together and define their own experience.”\textsuperscript{428} A space is created for women “to celebrate this new community, to commune with it, and to nurture themselves and be nurtured in the community of liberated sisterhood.”\textsuperscript{429} Such communities are essential to the liberation process because “women need separate spaces and all-female gatherings to form the critical culture that can give them an autonomous ground from which to critique patriarchy.”\textsuperscript{430}

Hunt concurs, noting that the relationship of Women-Church to the larger institutional church should not be conceived as a schism, a new denomination, or a new ecclesial entity.\textsuperscript{431} Women-Church has the capacity to be multi-dimensional in its relationship with the institutional church; therefore, it is “ambiguous” at best. For example, for some Women-Church members, the primary spiritual connection is with the feminist base community, yet in various degrees, they also participate in parish life. Because Women-Church does not require unilateral allegiance to the movement, some members of Women-Church have opted to stay engaged with their local parishes in some measure while also participating in local Women-Church base community groups.

\textit{The “Creative Dialectic” Relationship}

Innovation and creativity for institutional change germinates within the local base communities. Ruether speculates, “[T]ransformed liturgies, theological reflection, and social

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{428} Ibid., 59.
\item \textsuperscript{429} Ibid., 61.
\item \textsuperscript{430} Ibid., 59.
\end{itemize}
action developed in base groups could then be brought to bear on the institutional Church.™

The relationship between feminist communities and the institutional church is a “creative
dialectic”—a relationship only possible because of the intentionally ambiguity of membership
between Women-Church and the mainstream church.

Ruether identifies two advantages brought about by a relationship in tension. First, it
provides a place for an open community of like-minded people seeking renewal in the church to
gather together. It is a place to receive support for those whose theology stands counter to the
institutional church yet do not want to sever the relationship with the church. For example, in a
profile of twentieth-century popular church movements including Women-Church groups, the
relationship is marked by freedom and also commitment, but on their own terms:

In relation to the Roman Catholic Church as an institution, they have discovered a
remarkable way to be faithful to this church as a historical community while being
entirely free of its hierarchical control. They remain committed to Catholic Christianity,
as reinterpreted by feminist and liberation perspectives, and they understand their work as
a direct way of living out the gospel. They seek to witness to the clerical institution and
urge it to ongoing reform of its own structures in order that it may more adequately serve
the people in a similar way.™

Second, communities in dialectic relationship provide a means of communicating broadly
the message of the liberating base community to those in the institutional church who need to
hear it most. Ruether writes, “Even if the base community itself dissolves, the historical
institution becomes a means of transmitting the memory of these new options to other groups

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™ Ruether, Sexism and God-talk, 205.

States,” in A Democratic Catholic Church: The Reconstruction of Roman Catholicism, eds. Eugene
and new generations. Only by this creative dialectic between renewal community and historical institution is the Church regenerated by the Spirit within history."\(^{434}\)

**Loose Structure and a Mutable Identity**

Women-Church theologians are proponents of the movement’s lack of centralized leadership.\(^{435}\) Hunt writes, “[T]here is no headquarters, no president, no ordained ministers of women-church, no pope. There are simply many people who are sparking the spiritual creativity of women, plumbing the often hidden history of ourselves and our sisters, and organizing events and activities which gather our communities of justice-seekers.”\(^{436}\) According to Ruether, remaining a loosely-structured, decentralized movement is strategic. Refusing to be absorbed “into a superstructure or to provide any ongoing central office for the movement”\(^{437}\) allows Women-Church to remain a movement and not an institution.

Sociologist Kathleen Kautzer sees the movement’s lack of allegiance to any one institution as an opportunity for Women-Church to remain free from the imposed criteria that may exclude or polarize members.\(^{438}\) Kautzer comments, “By avoiding institutionalization, the Women-Church movement avoids the polarizing options of leaving or staying in the institutional

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\(^{434}\) Ibid., 206.


\(^{436}\) Neu and Hunt, *Women-Church Sourcebook*, 3.


\(^{438}\) Kautzer, “Catholic Feminists Confront Goliath,” 122.
church, joining one denomination or another, choosing Christianity or post-Christianity.” The same loosely-defined structural connection to the larger historical church, however, opens the movement to a fluid-like identity.

There are advantages in remaining free of centralized leadership, according to Ruether. The absence of leadership conveys that women seek to remain free from the control of the clerical class, that is, male-only leadership, even though leadership in the movement would most likely be that of other women. She writes, “Since Women-Church is not an organization and has no official leaders or spokespersons, one cannot make a definitive statement of what its views are…. Indeed this deliberate looseness of structure, leaving the definition of its thought and way of operating up to whatever the local communities wish, fits very much into one of the salient characteristics of women’s religion…namely anti-clericalism.”

Additionally, Hunt promotes the movement’s structural flexibility to adapt and to expand into new religious expressions. Women-Church is “the spiral expression of the deepest aspects of the Christian tradition taken to new depths by women’s faithfulness.” A secondary purpose of Women-Church emerges: to synthesize the tradition into new expressions. The future of the religious nature of Women-Church, though beginning in the Christian tradition, is unknown because Women-Church is to be a “springboard for investigating, practicing and evaluating other traditions so that what results is a new synthesis of religious experience.” Such a fluid identity leaves open the possibility for Women-Church to move away from an absolute Christian

439 Ibid.
441 Neu and Hunt, Women-Church Sourcebook, 5.
442 Ibid.
tradition. For example, Ruether recounts an event held at a Women-Church conference that illustrates the movement’s tendency toward a new synthesis of religious experience. The feminist liturgy held at the conference reflected a mix of Christian tradition and that of the post-Christian goddess of Ireland. Participants altered from the traditional Christ-centered celebration of the eucharist and instead planned a celebration of a woman-centered liturgy. According to Ruether, this synthesis is not uncommon to Women-Church gatherings. “Women-Church has not made a decision to be either confined to Christianity or to move out of Christianity completely.”

In sum, as a movement in dialectic process with the institutional church and that espouses letting a new synthesis of church evolve, theologians of Women-Church believe a theological rationale will emerge that will clarify the identity and role of the Women-Church movement within the larger institution of Christianity. Members conclude that some of the symbols and rituals of Christianity are redeemable from patriarchy while some are not. In transforming the patriarchal church, however, a stage of ambiguous Christian identity is not only an assumed risk but is potentially advantageous. The future of Christianity and non-Western religions may adapt because there is nothing to oblige the firm boundaries to distinguish Christian identity from other religions. These issues of adaptation and stability reappear as a central theme in the interpretation and analysis of all three decentralized movements in chapter five.

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When it is found that the basic assumptions which generate a logical system have no reality value then the chain of logic with which people bind themselves and others will be found to be insubstantial and to see, that that which binds us becomes unsubstantial when we are no longer attached to it, is the way of discovering one’s inherent freedom.444

Perhaps the most definitive teaching of Christ on the manner in which the structures of the church were to be worked is a negative one. “You know that among the pagans the rulers lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you. No; anyone who wants to be great among you must be your slave just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:25-28). This instruction and example told them precisely who they were not to imitate.445

Part I: A Shift in the Governing Logic of Ecclesial Structures

The problem of power is a prominent theme in Leonardo Boff and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s critique of the church’s institutional structures. Power, as a consequence of a larger underlying logic, governs the hierarchical shape of the institutional church. Writing on models of organizational logic, P. B. Herbst notes, “Every rational logic rests on a set of axiomatic assumptions which generate a structural system and the mode in which it functions as a consequence. A set of axioms of this type may be described as a genetic core,” which in turn “structures the total universe in a comprehensible, meaningful and ideally consistent and unambiguous way.”446 A structural logic that prioritizes power is predisposed to generate structures of power.


446 Herbst, Alternatives to Hierarchies, 69-70.
Identified in the analysis of the church’s centralized power structures are two competing logics. On the one hand, in an institutional ecclesiology the church is primarily conceived by the visible hierarchical structure, the efficacy of its juridical power, and clearly defined lines of authority; therefore, a hierarchical imagination governs the pyramidal structure. The concern for power is primary in the hierarchical model, and thus functions as the organizational logic for institutional structures. On the other hand, in a decentralized ecclesiology as seen in the Catholic Worker, BECs, and Women-Church, the principle of functionality governs ecclesial structures. In this structural system, the concern for power is secondary at best, and when power is conceived as agency rather than restraint or control, it serves to animate the mission of the church forward into the world. Therefore, mission, understood as continuing the teaching and ministry of Jesus in the world, is the organizational logic that informs the three decentralized movements in this study.

This chapter proceeds with a comparative analysis and interpretation of the sociological, historical, and theological observations of the decentralized structures of the Catholic Worker, BECs, and Women-Church movements described in previous chapters. Boff and Schüssler Fiorenza are the primary theologians representative of the alternative ecclesial models of BECs and Women-Church movements, respectively, while the personalist philosophy of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin emerge as key to the anarchist network of the Catholic Worker movement. Divided into two parts, Part I identifies the shift in logic behind the decentralized structures, from that of power in the hierarchical model to the logic of mission, which governs the three movements in this study. Part II establishes that the logic of mission, which governs structures to mediate ministry and achieve the mission of the church, functions to anchor the movements in the Christian tradition and the origins of the early church.
Analysis: Critique of Institutional Power

Boff and Schüssler Fiorenza critique institutional ecclesial structures based on a top-down mechanism of power that is not Gospel-informed and that does not abide by the teachings of Jesus on the kingdom of God. Neither Day nor Maurin explicitly criticized the church’s hierarchical structures, though they placed the church under scrutiny for its complacency in resisting the state’s oppressive economic systems. All three decentralized movements reject structural mechanisms of power that promote systems of domination and oppression of people and society. The following analysis largely draws on Schüssler Fiorenza and Boff’s analysis of the church’s hierarchical structures to develop the argument that institutional ecclesial structures are governed by the logic of power.

Women-Church emerged as a decentralized movement in response to the growing feminist consciousness of the last century. Feminist theologians exposed practices of sexism in the history of the Christian church and identified a pervasive patriarchal ideology that undergirds the hierarchical “logic” behind church structures. The church’s institutional structures generate a flawed social construction that establishes relational dependencies and power differentials. For Schüssler Fiorenza, structured domination as organizationally normative is difficult to reconcile with the teachings of Jesus and the egalitarian experiences of the nascent church.

The logic of “kyriarchy,” that is, rule by master or lord, governed early ecclesial structures. The adaptation of Greco-Roman social constructions resulted in the justification of a repeating pattern of domination and subordination, of the powerful and the oppressed, as a

447 Mary Daly is recognized as an early critic of the church’s patriarchal ideology. Her 1969 book *The Church and the Second Sex* exposed the church at a time when second-wave feminism was drawing attention to the equal rights of women. As profiled in chapter three, the three primary feminist theologians associated with Women-Church are Rosemary R. Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Mary Hunt.
normative mechanism of power for ecclesial structures. Power as domination compounded social pathologies and, at various times through history, the church was an accomplice of not only sexism, but also other structural oppressions such as colonialism, classicism, triumphalism, and racism. Because of kyriarchal logic, women continue to be excluded from decision-making roles in the church merely based on gender. In addition, while the reforms of Vatican II retrieved a communal-participatory ecclesiology, the bishops did not implement structural changes to end the systematic exclusion of women from ecclesial life—sacramental or otherwise.

The base ecclesial communities (BECs) model in Latin America was a response to the oppressive economic and social systems in the midst of the ongoing struggle for independence from centuries of colonial Christendom. Church leaders were conscientized to the disparity between affluent parts of the country and severe economic depression and social strife in other parts. This same pattern of affluence juxtaposed with impoverishment was repeated at the regional and local levels, creating a social injustice in which the church was as equally culpable as was the secular faction for the systemic and structural oppression of the poor. Once aware of the church’s complicity, the bishops of Latin America committed to a preferential option for the poor, enacting a praxis of liberation and taking specific action to resist the social and economic systems that impoverished the Latin American people.

The same hierarchical logic that governed secular oppressive systems also governed the ecclesial structures, blinding church leaders to the oppression mechanisms of unchecked power in centralized structures. Like SchüSSLER Fiorenza, Boff opposes the mechanism of centralized structures, asserting that power moves only in one direction, along a vertical axis, from the top to the bottom tier. The pope and his bishops are “divine holding-tanks” of power, and as such, the hierarchy possess and mediate power; the laity are rendered impotent as creators, initiators, or
generators of ministry. Moreover, because power is a resource that is possessed, a cleric can gain or lose it as he moves higher or lower on the pyramid. Divine power, then, is a resource entrusted to the ordained few yet denied to most of the people of God. Consequently, a hierarchical logic constructs a privileged class of bishops, priests, and deacons who hold power over the lay members of the church.

Boff renounces the governing logic that guarantees perpetual power of the institutional church structure. He opposes the church’s claim for divinely-willed, hierarchical structures: “Before hierarchies and differences, Jesus sought to introduce fellowship, participation, community.” The church is to be an ordered community, but the order and structure is for the good of the community and not for the dominion of one over another. Hierarchical logic based upon “divine-legacy” constructs a distorted image of Christ as one who rules over rather than the suffering servant who renounces earthly power. In addition, Boff raises concerns about a model in which power is privileged, absolute, self-authorized and justified, and that cannot be contested or changed. What is the restraint or limitation of power for which, or whom, the church must be subject? Boff indicts the church for structures of power that do not protect individual human rights. Hierarchical structures have not always served as instruments of justice in and outside of the church, as the church’s history of abusing sacred power and neglecting or exploiting of the less powerful have proven.

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449 Ibid., 46.

450 Ibid.

451 Boff, *Church, Charism and Power*, 33.
As a divinely-revealed institution, the hierarchical structure is immutable and cannot change. Even if modern social advancements in political systems yield a more just way to govern that fully protect the inalienable character of human rights and just communities, the institutional model of structured domination will (and must) remain normative in the church. The contradiction in theology of the church’s structures and ecclesial practice, according to Boff, lies in “a certain way of understanding and organizing reality of the ecclesial structure—a somewhat permanent state of affairs.”

Like BECs and Women-Church, the Catholic Worker movement emerged as a result of particular contextual factors of the time. The global economic collapse of the Great Depression generated some of the most severe social ills in twentieth-century American life; many were left without work, which cascaded into widespread poverty and homelessness. The needs of the poor contributed to the acute sense of urgency in establishing a social program to put into practice the church’s social teaching. The papal encyclicals *Rerum novarum* (1899) and *Quadragesimo anno* (1931) laid out the fundamental theology for the responsibility Catholics have to become agents of social change in putting their faith to work in the public sphere.

Though power as domination is not an explicit theme in the writings of Day or Maurin, one can extrapolate, on the basis of the anarchist and personalist philosophy that undergirds the movement that they rejected power conceived as coercive and “superordinating.” The Sermon on the Mount established an ethic that informed the pacifist position upheld by Day and, though controversial at the time, it became the backbone to the Workers’ practice of non-violent protest

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452 Ibid.

453 As noted earlier, Day and Maurin did not explicitly reject the hierarchical structures of authority. See chapter two, footnote 5.
and radical acts of love—something “which [Maurin and Day] see as contrary to the coercive elements of political, economic, and military institutions.” For instance, Maurin opposed any dependency on institutions at the expense of personal responsibility for one’s brother. The advancement of a modern industrial society generated social and economic dependencies on a capitalist economy driven by unfettered greed; the loss of the dignity of the individual, as well as the concern for the common good, was undermined in such systems. Day used the phrase “Holy Mother State” as a contemptuous term for state government that enabled society’s allegiance to the mass institution. The extent of her and Maurin’s critique of the institutional church lay in the church’s complacency in standing on the side of the poor, taking concrete action in alleviating poverty and social injustices, and the negligence of communicating to Catholics their responsibility in being agents of social change.

The concern for power and its underlying governing logic is a major theme in Boff and Schüssler Fiorenza’s critique of the institutional structures of the church. As contextually responsive movements, Women-Church, BECs, and the Catholic Worker emerge at odds with the oppressive economic, social, and ecclesial structures which characterized their ministry contexts. All three decentralized movements rejected structural mechanisms of power that promoted systems of domination and oppression of people and society as a whole.

**Interpretation: The Logic of the Hierarchical Imagination of the Institutional Church**

At the heart of Boff and Schüssler Fiorenza’s concern for institutional power is the hierarchical logic that constructs power differentials and systems of structural oppression. A

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454 Boehrer, “Christian Anarchism and the Catholic Worker,” 53.
brief historical review will show the development of a hierarchical logic that governs the institutional model.

The development of the notion of sacred power as mediated through hierarchical levels first occurred during the early medieval period. Church historians and theologians cite the late fifth to early sixth century\textsuperscript{455} philosophical writings of Pseudo-Dionysius entitled \textit{The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy}:

But now I will attempt to describe our Hierarchy, both its source and essence, as best I can; invoking Jesus, the source and Perfecting of all Hierarchies. Every Hierarchy, then, is, according to our august tradition, the whole account of the sacred things falling under it, a most complete summary of the sacred rites of this or that Hierarchy, as the case may be. Our Hierarchy, then, is called, and is, the comprehensive system of the whole sacred rites included within it, according to which the divine Hierarch, being initiated, will have the communication of all the most sacred things within himself, as chief of Hierarchy.\textsuperscript{456}

Theologian Thomas O’Meara suggests that the term “hierarchy,” understood as a practical mode of order represented a model of three tiers of “hierarchic triads” through which divine light was mediated. A triad of angels are at the highest heavenly level, with sacramental “Initiators” residing at the second tier (bishops, priests, and deacons) who mediate Divine “Light” down the ladder to the next rung. At the third level are the “Initiated”; they are consecrated monks, the baptized, penitents, and catechumens. At this lowest level are people who do not mediate light, but are only recipients of the light.\textsuperscript{457} Haight summarizes the impact of Dionysius’ hierarchical imagination on ecclesiology:


\textsuperscript{457} Prusak, \textit{The Church Unfinished}, 168.
Its organizational infrastructure had ideological support in a metaphysical and divinely willed plan. In the hierarchical universe of Dionysius, the top-down structure originated in heaven, and the earthly structure symbolically schooled the imagination, informed the mind, and directed human behavior so that the church could lead human existence back to God. The word ‘church’ in the medieval period, more than at any time before, returned to a universal hierarchical structure.\footnote{Haight, \textit{Christian Community in History, Vol. I}, 330.}

Dionysius largely defined hierarchical logic as organizationally normative for the church through the Middle Ages. “And each of the three divisions of our Hierarchy, comformably to that of the Law, and the Hierarchy, more divine than ours, is arranged as first and middle and last in power; consulting both reverent proportion, and well-ordered and concordant fellowship of all things \textit{in} harmonious rank.”\footnote{Dionysius the Areopagite, \textit{The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy}, Chapter 5, section II, www.tertullian.org/fathers/areopagite_14_ecclesiastical_hierarchy.htm#c1 (accessed February 26, 2016).} O’Meara concludes, “The Middle Ages loved \textit{ordo}, the arrangement of beings.”\footnote{O’Meara, “Philosophical Models in Ecclesiology,” 7.} The organizational structure of the church mirrored the political structure of the secular monarchy: “[s]ecular or temporal power and authority flowed downward from emperors and kings, princes and lords, nobles and knights.”\footnote{Prusak, \textit{The Church Unfinished}, 178.} Similarly, the power of the papal monarchy resided with the head, that is the pope, who mediated power down through the hierarchical structure to the pope’s subordinates, to the archbishops and to his priests. The laity held no spiritual authority; spiritual power was exercised for them and over them.

The hierarchical imagination continued to govern the development of church structures and set the trajectory for ecclesial structures throughout the second millennium. The polemical context of the sixteenth-century Reformation(s) contributed to the centralization of power as a characteristic mark of the true church, and as a result, catalyzed the shift of “the dominant model
of church organization from a fellowship of local communities joined by a bond of peace into a centralized model of the church.”

Jesuit Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621), a theologian of the Counter Reformation era, conceptualized the church as a perfect society, “as visible and palpable...as the Kingdom of France, or the republic of Venice.” In the aftermath of the Council of Trent (1545-1563), Bellarmine’s ecclesiology defined the church primarily through its visible, centralized ecclesiastical authority; the office of the papacy was granted purview over the affairs of the local church in the effort to bring control and uniformity in the wake of the Reformation. Thus, Bellarmine “constructed an ecclesiology that defined the Roman Catholic Church principally in terms of its visibility, its divinely willed authority, and its possession of the four notes which ‘proved’ it to be the one true church of Christ.” Power was reallocated from local bishops to the pope; centralization of power ensured uniform conciliar changes and established a clear identity as a defense against the claims of the Reformers. Effectively, the sixteenth century marked the beginning of an institutionalist logic that made a hierarchical imagination normative for the Catholic Church.

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the church further established an institutionalist mindset, centralizing power as defense against the proponents of Liberalism and modernist thought. The privileged period of Christendom was ending and the church was attempting to mitigate sweeping cultural and intellectual changes brought about by the Enlightenment—even as its influence and power over the spiritual and temporal realms was

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462 Michael B. Fabry, “Communio and the local community: Recapturing Traditional Understandings of Church” (PhD, Graduate Theological Union, 1999), 223.

dissipating. In response, the bishops at Vatican I (1868-1869) drafted Pastor Aeternus (First Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ) to once and for all sacralize the centralization of power through papal primacy:

Since the Roman Pontiff, by the divine right of the apostolic primacy, governs the whole Church…. The sentence of the Apostolic See (than which there is no higher authority) is not subject to revision by anyone, nor may anyone lawfully pass judgment thereupon…. So, then, if anyone says that the Roman Pontiff has merely an office of supervision and guidance, and not the full and supreme power of jurisdiction over the whole Church, and this not only in matters of faith and morals, but also in those which concern the discipline and government of the Church dispersed throughout the whole world; or that he has only the principal part, but not the absolute fullness, of this supreme power; or that this power of his is not ordinary and immediate both over all and each of the Churches and over all and each of the pastors and faithful: let him be anathema.

The influence of the hierarchical imagination peaked at Vatican I and was established as normative for ecclesial structures. Thus, the logic of descending power informed ecclesial structures and sustained the pyramidal structural system for five hundred years, from the Counter Reformation through the eve of Vatican II. The ecclesiology of Roman Catholicism was “total institution”—a pyramidal society organized hierarchically under the pope and his bishops and governed by a hierarchical logic. In sum, a structured power differential, “willed by God, informed by God in Christ and as spirit, so that the church is holy in its institutional forms.”

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464 It is important to note the dynamics of power in the historical changes occurring in this time period of the church. The church’s vast temporal and spiritual influence during the peak of Christendom was waning and that power was perceived as a possession that secured the church’s ability to control, to restrain, and to exert domination over the masses. As noted by Hinze, power as domination is a zero-sum game; it can be lost or gained. As such, the threat to the church’s loss of spiritual as well as temporal power provoked a response to further secure ecclesial power and to mitigate the loss.


reified the hierarchical vision that defined the shape of the church in the second millennium. As a result, the logic of ontological power became the organizational key of ecclesial structures.

**The Organizational Logic of Mission**

All too frequently, the power of the Church is remote for those who need it most: the poor, the persecuted and the politically disadvantaged. At the same time, there is no denying the capacity of power within the Church to effect change, bring order, transform and challenge. Frequently, the history of the Church in late modernity is caricatured by concepts of power and weakness: it often feels pressurized into making a choice between the false dichotomy of meekness and majesty.  

Moral theologian Charles Curran raised the question of why discussions of power have not been in the forefront of the Catholic tradition. His response was that “Catholic social ethics traditionally proposed an organic understanding of the society and the state. The analogy of the body was often employed to explain political order. Each part of the body plays a role under the direction of the head…. [A] hierarchical order determined the relationship among them.” The impact of a hierarchical vision as the primary lens through which the church interprets all else has obscured the issue: “Catholics insisted on stability, harmony, rationality, and hierarchy and overlooked the reality of power in social and political life;” consequently, its implications in social ethics have gone unquestioned in theological discussions. Historical consciousness, however, has triggered an awareness of the dynamics of power and its role in creating unjust social and economic systems. Curran notes that with a shift in consciousness, “a greater acceptance of the subject, and a heightened awareness of the Gospel’s call for justice and more

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469 Ibid., 131.
equitable social and political structures, the Catholic tradition has begun to recognize the role of power."

Cognizant of the need for an ethic of power informed by the gospel, the three decentralized movements renegotiate a logic by which ecclesial structures should be more justly conceived. The Catholic Worker, BECs, and Women-Church movements construct an alternative logic of governance that exercises power without the dimension of superordination as in the institutional model. As demonstrated in the following section, all three movements adopt a decentralized model that reflects an understanding of power as agency and that stands counter to a power-over model as that of the church’s institutional ecclesial structures. This shift in the understanding of power, its multi-dimensional dynamics, and the nature of its efficacy lays the groundwork for a change in organizational logic from power to mission, where power is secondary and in service to the mission of the church.

**Analysis: An Alternative Vision of Power in Ecclesial Structures**

Feminist social ethicist Christine Firer Hinze names two mechanisms of power as understood in the social sciences and philosophical disciplines. On the one hand, scholars of the early modern period argue that power is understood as “power-over,” or power as domination. Accordingly, power-over is the capacity for an individual or group to exert

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470 Ibid.

471 Theologian and Anglican priest Martyn Percy, in *Power and the Church: Ecclesiology in an Age of Transition*, (London: Cassell, 1998), also identifies two broad categories of power that parallel Hinze’s work. One category stresses conflict, exertion of will, and resistance; power in this sense is born out of social relations that are marked with competition and conflict. Alternatively, power as a collective capacity for achievement is based in a communal welfare such that all involved are beneficiaries of power. For Percy, in religious contexts typified by both communal exchange and conflict, elements of both types of power are always present.

control over and to command obedience. Negative connotations accompany this concept, and as such, power-over is generally understood to include a dimension of coercion that requires compliance, disregard for one’s will or choice, and punitive action for non-compliance. Hinze notes that those who conceive power negatively tend to emphasize the potentiality of its oppressive nature and, subsequently, seek to establish structures to constrain its unbridled use. Power-over, then, is subordination or “control over decisions, paths of action, and outcomes, but especially over other people”\textsuperscript{473} in order to secure certain ends intended by the power-holder. In addition, this type of power is perceived as a commodity to be possessed and that can be lost or gained as a zero-sum game; therefore, power is distributed only when predetermined conditions are met in order to ensure its availability or accessibility when needed. Finally, efficacy, or the effective exercise of power, is achieved through commanding obedience of a subordinate or the conquest of an individual or group possessing less effective power.

On the other hand, “power-to” as articulated by Hinze “is most fundamentally relationships that enable agency” through the mechanism of “creative or transformative efficacy.”\textsuperscript{474} As such, power understood as agency is “primarily people’s ability to effect their ends”\textsuperscript{475} in such a way that reflects the power of creation and the transformative power of understand power as domination: Max Weber, Robert Dahl, C. Wright Mills, and Steven Lukes among others.


\textsuperscript{474} Hinze, “Power in Christian Ethics,” 279.

\textsuperscript{475} Hinze, \textit{Comprehending Power in Christian Social Ethics}, 5. Hans-Peter Geiser articulates power as a mechanism that enables “people [to] discover their own inner and outer power to change the world. Power in this sense is freedom-creating, space-giving, hope-filling. Power in this sense has nothing to do with most of our command and uncommon concepts of limiting, destructive, coercing power that rules, forbids, and stands above people, ruling over them.” Power, as perceived by Geiser, carries notions of postmodern values in contrast to a modern understanding of power that more closely resemble power-over and that require constraints. Hans-Peter Geiser, \textit{The Community of the Weak: Social Postmodernism
redemption. It cannot be possessed or protected as quantifiable goods, and perhaps most importantly, power-to peaks in efficacy when exercised with and in collaboration with others.\footnote{Hinze identifies key thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Michael Foucault, and Talcott Parsons as the minority contingency who interpret power as “basically transformative efficacy.” Hinze, ”Power in Christian Ethics,” 277, n2.}

Hinze’s articulation of the two competing mechanisms of power has implications for reimagining ecclesial structures governed by a logic other than power. She writes, “Historically, notions of divine power-over have also been refracted in visions of society and church as hierarchies of divinely ordained relations of command and obedience.”\footnote{Ibid., 281.} Hinze’s typology of power-to aligns with the organizational logic of mission identified in the decentralized movements, thereby supporting an alternative vision of power in ecclesial structures. Even power understood as agency, however, remains secondary in structural systems governed by mission.

The ecclesiologies of Boff and Schüssler Fiorenza adopt an alternative mechanism of power that more aptly reflects transformative agency. Both retrieve a Pauline model that is circular rather than pyramidal and that places emphasis on relationships characterized by sibling relations, equality and dignity for all, and inclusivity as granted through Christian baptism. Also, Paul’s notion that all members are equally but diversely gifted is a common thread used by both theologians. Schüssler Fiorenza dismantles all structural notions of a patriarchal logic, and as such, sacred power is accessible to all and not mediated through hierarchical power-holders. She employs the image of a “body-politic.” In the political context of the Greco-Roman \textit{polis}, to be

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the *soma*, or the body of Christ, was to be “in Christ” together where all are given equal access to the gifts of the Spirit. Therefore, all shared the responsibilities of the *ekklēśia*.

Boff captures the multi-dimensionality of divine power: “Christ’s power (*exousia*) resides not only in certain members, but in the totality of the people of God as a vehicle of Christ’s triple ministry of witness, oneness, and worship. This power of Christ’s is diversified in accordance with specific functions, but it leaves no one out. The laity emerge as creators of ecclesiological values.”\(^{478}\) Charisms are distributed among the community, for the good of the community, and as a manifestation of the Spirit of God who symbolically resides at the center of the community. Charismatic power, then, is a creative and transforming enabling of members who are co-responsible for the church’s mission in the world.

Boff and Schüssler Fiorenza differ over the claim that the charism of unity entrusted to the bishop is a necessary function. Boff acknowledges that the hierarchical function is essential but wants to mitigate the institutional tendency to define the church solely as the hierarchical dimension. “The hierarchical function must be understood…as subsisting within the faith community and in its service.”\(^{479}\) The charism of unity, as a special grace given to the bishop, is not an “autocratic power *over* the church, but a power that is at its heart and for its service.”\(^{480}\) On the other hand, Schüssler Fiorenza does not recognize the role of hierarchical leadership, either for those gifted with the charism of unity and service, or for men who hold headship and power over the church. Such notions perpetuate the distortion of patriarchal patterns in the

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\(^{479}\) Ibid., 24.

\(^{480}\) Ibid., 28.
authority structures of the church. She writes, “Structures of domination should not be tolerated in the discipleship-community of Jesus.”

While the Women-Church movement claims freedom from the centralized leadership of the institutional church, the charism of leadership is recognized; those who have the capacity to lead should be appointed and should lead. For Schüssler Fiorenza, leadership should alternate and be shared since in the *soma* of Christ, “[n]o one can claim to have a superior function because all functions are necessary and must be equally honored.” Like that of Boff’s model, the role of leadership in the community is a gift of the Spirit and is to be exercised not as power-over, but as power-as-collaboration for the benefit and service of others.

As noted earlier, power was not an explicit theme in Day’s writings or other secondary sources. It is clear, however, that those in the movement embodied a notion of power understood as “most fundamentally relationships that enable agency.” Three characteristic factors foundational to the Catholic Worker movement demonstrate that the efficacy of power intends transformation, both of the person and for the transformation of society. First, the philosophical tenets of personalism largely set the expectation for a power-to mechanism. In practice, personalism means that each person is “to act on their own initiative for the common good, respecting the dignity of each individual.” Day and Maurin placed priority on the value and dignity of human beings, their individual rights, and their duty to personal responsibility;

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481 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 221.

482 Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 20.


consequently, a foundation was established by which a power-to mechanism was perfectly suited to effect change. Moreover, the conditions created by a personalist approach supports Hinze’s concept of the synergistic efficacy of human potential afforded by personal responsibility in partnership with the creative and transformative power of God:

When the power-to of God is emphasized, an understanding of human power as a kind of mutually exercised partnership with God is promoted. Here the implications of the *imago dei* for human power are located in humans’ ability to participate in creating, life-engendering and life-sustaining action. The linkage and cooperation, rather than the distinctions and potential conflicts, between human and divine power are highlighted.\(^{485}\)

Second, the high value placed on community in the Catholic Worker movement created a social milieu that was ripe for promoting collaborative power. In Hinze’s review of Hannah Arendt and her contribution to a power-to theory, Arendt concludes that “power-to cannot endure unless a structure of community and authority is founded that can ‘house’ it.”\(^{486}\) A bond is created between community and power, and the bond compounds the efficacy of power as creative agency. Hinze notes, “Arendt argues that by binding and promising, combining and covenanting, people can create structures that allow them to continue to be together, and thus continue to generate power-to.”\(^{487}\) We see evidence of this phenomenon in the Catholic Worker in which the mission to do the works of mercy each day was accelerated by establishing houses of hospitality. Community created the structure that ‘houses’ every aspect of life at the Catholic Worker, in providing for the material needs of guests, as well as in the daily tasks of cooking and eating, assisting others in personal needs, instructing others, and even in the shared tasks of writing, editing, and distributing the newspaper.

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\(^{486}\) Ibid., 287; Arendt, Hannah. *Human Condition; Between Past and Future* (NY: Penguin) 1961.

\(^{487}\) Ibid., 288.
Third, Day played a significant role in sustaining the practice of collaborative power among the Catholic Worker communities. In this sense, the “Dorothy Factor” cannot be underestimated in the extent to which she modeled power as agency within the movement. As noted earlier, while alive her influence across the Catholic Worker network was “powerful and constant,” serving as a bridge between the communities. Though all of the Houses of Hospitality functioned autonomously as decentralized communities, “[Day] modeled a practice of friendship that reached beyond the boundaries of her movement” and her friendship fostered a unity that spanned across the entire network. Rather than a sense of rivalry or a competitive spirit, particularly with those who held differing views, she created a sense of collaboration and mutual dependency between members of the communities.

In addition, Day served as a mediator within the Catholic Worker. When differences in opinion occurred and a resolution could not be reached, leaders of communities sought her advice because her opinion was perceived as authoritative. “In a technical sense, the Catholic Worker lacked organizational structure, hierarchical leadership, and clearly defined rules or policies. But in a practical sense, it was not needed because Day’s influence was tremendous.”

Day had a natural, charismatic influence by which she exercised unofficial leadership across the movement, thereby employing power as agency to animate others in the mission of the entire movement.

Effectively, the Catholic Worker, like BECs and Women-Church movements, rejected the former mechanism of power-over and adopted an alternative notion of power as agency.

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489 McKanan, The Catholic Worker After Dorothy, 23.

Power conceived as collaborative, creative, and transformative agency calls for a new logic to govern ecclesial structures. The final section of Part I demonstrates that the logic of functionality establishes mission as the organizational key in the three movements.

**Interpretation: The Logic of Mission in the Decentralized Ecclesial Structures**

Christ did not establish the Church as a democratic institution. I think that this statement is, on the whole correct. It is even more correct to say, however, that Christ did not establish a centralized autocracy either.... An absolute monarchy type of organization has very little scriptural support. Most important, however, is the fact that by and large Christ was (and we can presume continues to be) indifferent to organizational models for the Church. The organizational form should be that which best serves the mission of the Church. ⁴⁹¹

In the quote above, theologian James Drane pointedly articulates the shift from the logic of power that constitutes the hierarchical vision of the institutional model to the logic of mission in the decentralized movements. The principle of functionality, according to Roger Haight, governs the shape of ecclesial structures in a historical approach to ecclesiology; thus, by the same principle, there is a shift in the organizational formula from power to that of mission for the three decentralized movements. Power understood as creative and transformative, nevertheless, remains secondary to mission in decentralized systems.

The early church’s mission to continue the message of Jesus Christ necessitated the adaptation of ecclesial forms. “The principle of functionality must be embraced—in so far as specific ministries and institutions are discussed it is the ‘well-being of the community’ and of its continued faithfulness to its mission and the ministry of Christ that counts.”⁴⁹² Ministerial needs of the early Christian community governed the development of the church’s ecclesial structures.

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By necessity, historians find in the “logic of the church’s early development a fluidity and responsiveness to rapidly changing conditions,“\textsuperscript{493} confirmed by the method of critical and historical consciousness. Change and contextual adaptation in the principle of functionality, therefore, was normative. In contrast to the assumption of a divinely-instituted structural system in which “change is problematic and has to be explained,”\textsuperscript{494} a historically conscious ecclesiology anticipates change and is aptly marked by fluidity and adaptability of ecclesial structures. John Beal, professor of canon law at the Catholic University of America, concludes that the hierarchical logic of institutionalist ecclesiology may overreach its capacity to justify its structures based on functionality and implies that the model sustains the hierarchical vision under an ulterior pretense:

Like baroque monarchies of an earlier age, the Catholic Church has learned to justify its hierarchical structures and allocation of functions on the pragmatic ground that it is essential for maintaining unity in faith and disciples. Nevertheless, the hierarchical differentiation is not merely instrumental and functional but normative and ontological. Unlike the secular world, where form follows function, function necessarily follows form in the church.\textsuperscript{495}

Early ecclesial structures adapted in accordance with the context and needs of the community; nevertheless, change was not for change’s sake but served the ultimate end to continue the ministry and teaching of Jesus in the world. According to Haight, in a functional approach to new ministerial structures “[t]he goal is always the well-being of the community and the exercise of its mission to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ in history…. When there is a


\textsuperscript{494} Ibid.

need or an exigency in the community, ordinarily it is met by an impulse to address it…. In short, the criteria for new ministries are the needs of the community and the requirements for carrying its mission forward.” Likewise, Pope Francis, in an address to the bishops of CELAM in the summer of 2013 spoke of a new paradigm in a “missionary key,” or the logic of mission by which the church in Latin America is reformed, including the reform of ecclesial structures. He said:

The “change of structures” (from obsolete ones to new ones) will not be the result of reviewing an organizational flow chart, which would lead to a static reorganization; rather it will result from the very dynamics of mission. What makes obsolete structures pass away, what leads to a change of heart in Christians, is precisely missionary spirit. Hence the importance of the paradigmatic mission.

Consequently, each of the three movements is driven by a liberating mission as defined by their contexts. For the Catholic Worker, it was doing the works of mercy for the poor masses, bound by the oppressive, economic systems created by modern industrialism and capitalism. Likewise, BECs and Women-Church were driven by a sense of mission—to bring the liberating Gospel message to bear on the lives of the Latin American people oppressed by abject poverty and for women systemically disparaged in a patriarchal church, respectively. Therefore, mission is the organizational key in the Catholic Worker, BECs, and Women-Church movements.

Conclusion to Part I: Governed by the Logic of Mission

In the three movements in this study, the principle of functionality informs their decentralized ecclesial structures. As contextually-dependent movements, they stood counter to the oppressive economic, social, and religious systems that marked their ministry contexts and

496 Haight, Christian Community in History, Vol. I, 64.

adapted to exercise power as transformative agency. Power in these movements, however, is secondary to the logic of mission. In rejecting the logic of power, they adopted decentralized structures that were capable of exercising shared collaborative power, fostering strong cohesive communities, and engaging in a Gospel-informed praxis that animates the church’s transformative mission in the world.
PART II: Logic of Mission as Anchor in Decentralized Structures

The Church of the future will be one built from below by basic communities as a result of free initiative and association. … When living Christian communities are formed by the Christians themselves, when they possess and attain a certain structure, solidarity, permanence, they have just as much right as a territorial parish to be recognized as a basic element of the Church, as a Church of the bishop’s Church and of the whole Church, even though their concrete basis of association is not a territory marked out by the diocesan authorities and simply including the Christian residents there.498

Introduction

Stabilization is essential in a discussion of decentralized ecclesial structures such as the three movements explored in this study. How can non-hierarchical ecclesial structures provide sufficient stability to anchor the movements in the tradition of Christ and the accounts of the early church? The capacity of the church to adapt to the needs of a changing context raises legitimate concerns for fragmentation in Christian identity and for cohesiveness of the local church rooted in the larger universal church, particularly in a seemingly unstable postmodern milieu marked by pluralism, differentiation, and the authority of the local narrative.499 The emerging reality of a “world-church”500 necessitates relevant and local expressions of the church that carry the teaching and ministry of Jesus into the smallest corners of the world, much like the decentralized movements in our study have achieved. The pressing question is how the church, decentralized for mission, can remain anchored in the origins of the early Christian church:


What appears to be a successful inculturation to some appears to others as fragmentation, or syncretism, or heresy. Certainly the diversification among the churches is increasing in a manner and a rate that is unparalleled in Christian history, given the size and range of the Christian church today. The question is whether Christian identity is going to dissolve into a million indigenous pieces.\(^{501}\)

Part I demonstrated that the three movements, in rejecting the institutional ecclesiology and the hierarchical logic which govern ecclesial structures, adopted decentralized models in order to facilitate meeting ministry needs appropriate to their contexts. In changing to a decentralized model of small, organically-formed communities not anchored to the hierarchical structure of the local parish, did they risk stability? Did they become untethered and vulnerable to fragmentation of Christian identity and unity to the larger universal church? Part II addresses this question and identifies the factors that stabilize the decentralized movements and tether them to the church’s Christian origins. I contend that rather than total dependency upon the hierarchical structure, the basis of stability of the decentralized structures is the functional capacity to move the mission of the church forward, which continues in history the life and ministry of Jesus in the world.

**Principle of Functionality Rests on Mission**

As noted in the conclusion of Part I, the principle of functionality drove the logic that governed ecclesial structures and ministerial offices in the early church.\(^{502}\) The principle of functionality provides a historical-theological interpretation for the early church’s adoption of ministry structures. The logic is established in the functional capacity of the structure as the means to achieve the end, which in the case of the three movements is mission. In other words,

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for Haight, ecclesial structures must function to advance the mission of the church forward in history.

Haight suggests “three foundational principles of the church”\(^503\) as criteria to quantify the capacity of an ecclesial structure to achieve mission. Each criterion discerns the following questions: 1) Does the structure aim to embody and preserve the values of the teaching and ministry of Jesus? 2) Does it function to sustain a communitarian spirit, understood as the presence of God the Spirit as the “force that holds the community together in bonds of faith and love”\(^504\) and 3) Does it distribute the mission as the co-responsibility of the whole church?

While Haight uses the criteria for evaluation of offices and structures in the context of new ministries and ecumenical exchange, I build on Haight’s work and construct a model of stability based on observations of the Catholic Worker, BECs, and Women-Church movements and the non-structural factors that anchor them in the Christian tradition.

In chapters two, three, and four, each movement was assessed for the ability to actualize ministry according to Haight’s criteria. If the decentralized design met the three criteria—the memory of Jesus, a communitarian spirit, and shared responsibility for mission, and therefore moved the church’s mission forward—then it functions as a valid indicator for sufficient stability to anchor the movements, as non-hierarchical structures, in the tradition of Christ and the accounts of the early church.

\(^{503}\) Ibid., 414.

\(^{504}\) Ibid.
The Relationship of Three Criteria in the Logic of Mission

The relationship between stability in decentralized structures and the capacity to meet the three criteria is based upon the assumption that the church is fundamentally missional in nature. “The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father.” An ecclesial structure that successfully mediates ministry and aims to continue in history the life and mission of Jesus anchors the structure in Christian origins. The three criteria function in dynamic relationship to achieve mission, and thus serve as the basis for stability. In the following section, each criterion will be treated separately yet developed into an integrated model.

First Criterion: The Jesus Norm

As the first criteria, the Jesus Norm preserves the values found in the life, teaching, and ministry of Jesus as normative for the church and it roots the church’s mission in the origins of the Gospel tradition. The Jesus Norm establishes Christian scriptures as the “single most

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important structure.”

As a “norm which is not itself normed by any other norm” that draws on the memory of Jesus as preserved in the Gospels and in church tradition, scripture “stabilize[s] the foundational faith experiences of community [and] objectifies the faith and creates distance” across history and contexts. Therefore, it functions as “the main instrument of organizational continuity.” The Christian canon constitutes the Jesus Norm and “provides the objectified source for both stability and flexibility and innovation.”

Additionally, Haight articulates the a priori key for Christian identity: “What distinguishes Christian faith and spirituality as ‘Christian’ from all other faiths is Jesus of Nazareth…. Christians find God as given to them through the person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. All Christians share this spirituality.” A shared corporate spirituality of following Jesus anchors Christians to the tradition of the church. As such, Christian communion “does not

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506 Haight, Christian Community in History, Vol. I, 103; Haight draws primarily on Theissen, The Religion of the Earliest Churches, for this assertion. While Haight prioritizes the normative function of Christian scripture, he embeds this statement in a list of other “structures,” including the historical creeds, the routinization of authority through church law, governance structures, and communication in letters and travel records. Moreover, Haight locates himself in the Catholic tradition, which informs his understanding that scripture does not stand alone. It would be fair to conclude that he concurs with Dulles’ position based on Dei Verbum 9 and 10: “Scripture and tradition together constitute one sacred deposit. It is incorrect, therefore, to speak as though Scripture alone examined with the tools of historical-critical scholarship could adequately deliver the Word of God. Dei Verbum insists on the necessity of the ‘living tradition,’ and of the magisterium as its locus, for discerning the divinely intended meaning. An example would be the Catholic practice of attributing the words of Jesus to Peter as addressed likewise to the successors of Peter, the popes (Matt. 16:18–19).” Avery Dulles, “Vatican II on the Interpretation of Scripture,” in Letter and Spirit: The Authority of Mystery, the Word of God and the People of God, ed. Scott Hahn and Dave Scott (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2006), 22.


508 Ibid., 103.

509 Ibid.

510 Ibid.

lie in institutional structure but in unity with God mediated through Jesus of Nazareth and the way of life that embodies it."512 The norm of Jesus informs how to model Christian life and ministry in the world, and therefore functions as the norm for Christian mission. This dynamic is illustrated in bold below:

In all three decentralized movements, we see a theological foundation based on the norm of scripture and specifically, Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom of God. Both Schüssler Fiorenza and Boff rely primarily on the liberating vision of the kingdom of God (bașileia for Schüssler-Fiorenza), marked by values of inclusion, collaboration, equality, and the equitable distribution of sacred power. A kingdom-informed ethic functions to restrain power-as-domination and

512 Ibid.
demands a reform of the current institutional structures and the hierarchical logic that governs them. Boff asserts that a return to the “fundamental project of Jesus” will correct the ill-informed logic that orders humans in dominant-subordinate power differentials. Schüssler Fiorenza calls for the same Jesus norm to inform in the practices within the church. “Structures of domination and servanthood should not be tolerated in the community of equals,” which rejects a kyriarchal ideology and its ramifications in systems of racism, classism, poverty, and any other structural injustice.

In Day and Maurin’s writings, language of the kingdom of God is not notable. There are, however, values and explicit practices drawn from the teachings and ministry of Jesus that inform the practical mission of the Catholic Worker, most obviously the directive from Matthew 25 to do the works of mercy. Additionally, for Day the Sermon on the Mount was the “manifesto” to live a Jesus-informed Catholic Worker lifestyle. Maurin envisioned the transformation of society—“a new society in the shell of the old”—which carries echoes of the anticipation of a kingdom in which God’s shalom is fully realized. For Maurin, the Sermon on the Mount was the blueprint for a new society; it established a standard of values that turned worldly values on their head.

More so than the other two movements, the Catholic Worker and its mission to do the works of mercy each day establishes a clear set of actions and patterns for abiding in the tradition of Jesus and his teaching. The integration of action, reflection, and right belief construct an invisible structure that fosters a high commitment to praxis, one that leaves little room for a contradiction in one’s life and faith. The invisible framework likely emerged as the organic outcome of personalism at work, which effectively governs practices and beliefs in the Catholic

513 Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship of Equals, 305.
Worker movement and models the notion of personal vocation as mission. The integration of Jesus-informed mission and personal action emerges in Boff’s model, and to a lesser degree in Women-Church, as we will see in subsequent sections. In each case, the mission of the church is made visible in the decentralized structures, integrating faith to action for the transformation of the world. All three movements meet the first criteria for a Jesus-informed mission and ground the vision of Christian mission in Jesus’ ministry and teaching on the kingdom of God.

Second Criterion: A Communitarian Spirit

An ecclesial structure that holds the capacity to nurture intimate community by faith and love through God the Spirit creates a sense of cohesiveness among members. Writing on the contribution of twentieth-century institutionalists to contemporary ecclesiology, 514 Patrick Granfield relates the degree of cohesive community to the members’ commitment to the “directing idea,” which is the message that first inspired and drew the community together. Therefore, in the case of Christian community, the greater the shared commitment to the message and memory of Jesus that inspires and informs members, the deeper the relational bonds and sense of cohesiveness. 515 Granfield applies this principle as a factor in reducing the dependency on external structures. He concludes that nurturing the inner communitarian spirit lessens the need for external controls to ensure unity. Haight concurs, stating, “It is a gathering together of people on the basis of a common faith in God; it is the common faith that most deeply unites the church… [T]his faith experiences God as Spirit actively present to the church and, as it were,

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514 Granfield, “The Church as Institution: A Reformulated Model”; Granfield relies on the work of early twentieth-century French institutionalist Georges Renard for the dynamics of interpersonal solidarity.

515 Ibid., 445.
holding it together.” Thus, ecclesial structures that nurture inner bonds of community contribute to the stability of a community.

The “holding together” of community carries the notion of an inward, compelling force that pulls individuals into close relational union. In the institutional model, the juridical approach to relationships creates a distortion of the tension of structure and communitas, that is, the institutional and the communitarian dimensions of ecclesial reality. In healthy tension, one dimension functions to mitigate the other: structure preserves, while communitas animates. The two poles must co-exist, warns Dulles, such that both dimensions are manifested in the ecclesial structure to preserve the tension and to avoid one pole from eclipsing the other. When the institutional dimension obstructs the communitarian aspect, as in the institutionalism that marked the church from the Counter Reformation through the eve of Vatican II, “a deformation of the true nature of the Church” is the result. For the church to avoid (or to correct) the rut of total institutionalization, the communitarian dimension must be retrieved through a deliberate structural expression. In the same way, the communitarian yields to the institutional dimension. Haight writes, “Unmediated ‘community’ thus transcends the structured order of life; it threatens ordered life, yet it is the fact of the community, and structure structures it.” Nevertheless, the tensive balance of “the mediacy of structure and the immediacy of communitas…. is precisely

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the energy-giving and creative force of a society."\(^{520}\) The dynamic tension of the Jesus Norm and the *communitas* of spirited community are illustrated in bold below:

We see in all three decentralized movements a retrieval of the relational aspects of Jesus’ message; a primacy of community is normative. Boff not only seeks to correct the tension of structure and community but he places priority on the communitarian dimension. The institution must be in service to the communitarian (though not to the point of risking distortion), because “the communitarian spirit stands in constant need of nourishment and stimulation”\(^{521}\) to counter

\(^{520}\) Ibid.

\(^{521}\) Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis*, 5-6.
the ever-present tendency of the institution to cause stagnation. Consequently, Boff creates a place in the organizational framework for nurturing the relational aspects of the church. Small group formations are ideal; the place of community in his model is structurally normative.

Schüssler Fiorenza likewise emphasizes the communitarian dimension of the church, retrieving the biblical concept of *ekklēsia*, understood as the ongoing dynamic of an assembly of members in pursuit of the well-being of the whole community. The early Christian experience of the call to a Jesus-informed life cannot be separated from the adherence of oneself to the Christian community. The place of community in Schüssler Fiorenza’s model is structurally normative, as in Boff’s model, and is actualized through base communities.

While the communitarian dimension is structurally normative in Schüssler Fiorenza’s theoretical model, in practice it is not a radically inclusive community for all members. Feminist theologians and practitioners Rosemary Ruether and Mary Hunt\(^{522}\) both advocate for a “separated phase” as a necessary step in liberation from the patriarchal church. Liberated communities are created as spaces for solidarity as well as for normalizing women’s experience in ecclesial life. Authentic community\(^{523}\) is conditional until patriarchal ideology and practice is eliminated from the hierarchical church. Additionally, Hunt describes the relationship of Women-Church with the institutional church as “ambiguous.” The Women-Church movement does not require a unilateral allegiance of its community members, intentionally leaving the

\(^{522}\) Rosemary R. Ruether developed liturgies for Women-Church in her work, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities*; Hunt developed the *Women-Church Sourcebook*, useful for administrative practices and liturgies.

\(^{523}\) I use the term “authentic” to qualify the notion of community in Women-Church in contrast to community in the Catholic Worker. There are no rules imposed on membership that could exclude one from or requirements to include one in the Worker community. Communal life is radically inclusive, and as such, is a crucible for forging authentic community even if one is in ideological conflict with others.
relationship with the parish community as “creative dialectic” in nature. This serves to leave open an avenue for participants to carry the message and vision of an “equal and inclusive *ekklēsia*” into the institutional church. Consequently, though Women-Church is committed to the idea of community, the practice of a radically inclusive and intimate community is more difficult because the movement is intentionally structured to maintain relational ambiguity rather than deepening the bonds of authentic community in faith and love.

The Catholic Worker movement not only emphasizes a strong commitment to the primacy of a communitarian dimension, but also reinforces the commitment by providing a place for practicing intense community. The integration of a succinctly defined Jesus-informed mission articulated in the practice of the works of mercy and the establishment of Houses of Hospitality where community is practiced intensifies the communitarian dimension as normative and structurally immersive. Community, in the Catholic Worker, is the very air in which the mission lives and breathes. The dynamic of an inspiring Jesus-Norm and a commitment to an immersive community strengthens intimate relational bonds between those involved in the movement.

The strong presence of a communitarian spirit in an anarchist-based movement free of external structure is ironic; there is nothing structurally normative in which to ensure either cohesiveness or identification with the Catholic Worker movement. In fact, community is organically rather than structurally-normative and has the capacity to be “fluid” as needed. The community, as a lay-led and voluntary movement, is committed to participation in a shared mission and not necessarily in belonging to the institution.\(^{524}\) The fluidity of commitment, however, did not compromise the movement’s capacity to do the works of mercy each day.

\(^{524}\)Boehrer, “Christian Anarchism and the Catholic Worker,” 188-194. See also Boehrer’s three categories: institutional, non-institutional, and para-institutional church Catholic Workers. Ecclesiologist Richard McBrien made this point in contrasting ecclesiology models. He noted that in an institutional concept of church, “one ‘belongs’ to the Church.” In models of church as mystery or sacrament, “one
Personalism was likely a principal factor in the heightened sense of community in the Catholic Worker. Maurin’s concept of “gentle personalism” emphasized particular practices for the common good: to value people above all material things, to assume personal responsibility, and to take action to bring about change, even (and especially) at a personal cost. The practice of personalism constructed a social and personal ethic that when integrated into the community life of a Worker house inevitably yielded deep relational bonds (and, at times, interpersonal conflict). As we will see in the next section, the presence of a strong communitarian spirit in dynamic relationship with a personal call to sharing the Jesus-informed mission has been instrumental in anchoring the decentralized movements in the Christian tradition.

Third Criterion: A Mission Embodied

In addition to the inward force that strengthens the bonds of community, another equal and simultaneous force propels the community outward in mission for the transformation of the world.

The Church finds its ground of being in the event of Christ as a “Mission” and revelation from God to the world in history. A continuing response to God through Jesus Christ is therefore essential and constitutive of the Church, but in this conception is not an end in itself; for what is at stake is precisely the quality of that response to God through Christ. To be Christian and to be Church means to be “chosen” for service to continue the work of Christ in the world. This outward orientation to the world thus becomes a determinative factor in Christian spirituality, a criterion, and this in a final (teleological) way.525

Haight draws on Vatican II’s *Ad Gentes* (Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church) to establish mission as constitutive of the church, as “totally encompassing the Church” which is sent, “outgoing to and for the world.” 526 He delineates five dimensions of the church as mission. First, mission is the call of the whole church. “[E]ach Christian, every single person in the Church, shares a mission responsibility.” 527 Second, the church, in totality as a community, is sent in mission. Third, “the Church is essentially a mission” by nature, and it is the shared duty of the whole people of God. 528 Fourth, mission happens from the “very center of its inner life,” 529 and not merely at the periphery; therefore, wherever the church is present, mission happens. Finally, the locus of mission activity and responsibility resides at the local church or parish level, from which the community is sent out continually because the missionary activity of the church does not cease. 530

The church as gathered community is entrusted with the responsibility to animate mission into the world. Writing on the meaning of apostolicity for a postmodern church, Lakeland notes, “Because the Church is born in the events of the first Pentecost, when the apostles received the Holy Spirit and went out to preach Christ crucified, continuity in faith is tied above all to the idea of Spirit-inspired mission to the world.” 531 The ongoing transformative work of Christ in the world occurs when the Spirit-filled community brings to life Christian mission in a new reality

526 Ibid., 633, 642.

527 Ibid., 642; *Lumen Gentium* 17; Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church (DMAC), 23, 26.

528 DMAC, 35.


530 DMAC, 15, 6.

531 Lakeland, *Church: Living Communion*, 53-54.
such that the needs of the world are met in relevant, tangible, and transforming ways. This dynamic is illustrated in bold below:

The third criterion requires that ecclesial structures enable co-responsibility for the mission of the church. As decentralized movements, the Catholic Worker, BECs, and Women-Church each demonstrated the capacity to mobilize the people of God to continue the work of Jesus in the world. Two factors, structural and theological, are significant to note. Establishing base ecclesial communities as a decentralized vehicle for ministry alongside of the hierarchical church created multiple points of entry for the people of God to carry out responsibility for the church’s mission according to their charisms. This structural adaptation was significant for the revitalization of the Catholic Church in Brazil, where base communities reached upwards of
80,000 in three decades, creating a vast number of new participants contributing to the work of Christ in the world in one Latin American country. Women-Church adopted the same small base community model, increasing the points of entry for women in the American Catholic Church to be participants in ecclesial and (unofficial) liturgical roles—as leaders of liturgy, in preaching and pastoral roles, and as administrators and social activists, according to their spiritual gifts. Finally, the Catholic Worker houses of hospitality provided immediate access for Workers and guests to engage in the works of mercy. The mission to do the works of mercy, as explicitly defined tasks that “anyone can do,” made co-responsibility for the mission of the church a universal reality. Effectively, the Catholic Worker program put the responsibility for mission in the hands of the entire people of God.

Second, as a theological factor, both Boff and Schüssler Fiorenza draw on Vatican II’s teaching on baptism. In Lumen Gentium, the imagery of the people of God is employed, and it instructs that all members, by virtue of baptism, are equal in dignity and inclusion, and therefore must carry the call to responsibility as full collaborators in the mission of the church. The Catholic Worker movement, established in the pre-Vatican period, does not claim the virtue of baptism as the basis for lay participation. Rather, Day and Maurin were inspired by the social encyclicals, Rerum novarum in particular, which called the laity to be agents of social change for the transformation of society. Practices inherent in personalist philosophy, as noted earlier, substantially contributed to the sense of individual responsibility and personal action to carry out the mission. Because of the personalist directives, there is an implicit notion of individual

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532 If there were on average 10-12 members in each of the 80,000 BECs at the peak of the movement, the magnitude of Catholics involved in the church’s mission was immense.

533 Lumen Gentium, 32.
vocation which can be understood as a personal call to mission. As an anarchist-based movement, however, personal vocation does not convey any element of imposed commitment to community or the institution; rather, it is both taking responsibility for each other and, by the same measure, granting others the freedom not to take responsibility. Consequently, the invisible structure of personalist philosophy governs the norm of personal vocation as collaborators in continuing the work of Christ in the world. In sum, across all three decentralized structures, while the Jesus Norm functions to inform the church’s missiological end, the church as community embodies and animates mission in order to continue the work of Christ in the world.

_The Logic of Mission as Anchor in Decentralized Structures_

When the three criteria of ecclesial structures—following the memory of Jesus, nurturing a communitarian spirit, and sharing the responsibility of mission—are met, the mission of the church in history is moved forward in the world. The ongoing transformative work of Christ occurs when the Spirit-filled community embodies the Christian mission in a new reality, such that the needs of the world are met in relevant, tangible, and transforming ways. The Catholic Worker, BECs, and Women-Church movements, as decentralized structures governed by the logic of mission, preserve the Jesus Norm across time and space because Jesus’ teaching and ministry defined in the past has been embodied again in the present. Therefore, decentralized ecclesial structures that are governed by the logic of mission and that successfully mediate ministry aimed to continue in history the life and mission of Jesus, are anchored in the Christian tradition. The following diagram illustrates the three criteria in dynamic relation and functioning to move the mission of the church forward in history:
Concluding Annotation: Decentralized Movements and the Centralized Church in Tandem

In researching the three decentralized movements, several anomalies reported by sociologists of actual on-the-ground practices within the movements are worth noting. Two significant points in BECs and Women-Church movements emerged, particularly concerning the relationship of the decentralized movements and the hierarchical church as it pertains to the role of centralization. First, as noted in the chapter on base ecclesial communities, the degree of interdependence between the church’s hierarchy and BECs has lasting repercussions on the sustainability of the movement. When the bishops have been in support of the base ecclesial community model, the movement has thrived; when ecclesiastical support has been withdrawn, as was the case in the division of the archdiocese of São Paulo and the assignment of bishops by
the Vatican in 1989 who opposed BECs, the momentum of the movement was suspended. The capacity of the decentralized structure to distribute local decisions, tasks, and leadership for mission was disabled; consequently, centralized power for decision-making and action reverted to the parish priests.\textsuperscript{534} Therefore, when re-envisioning the place of decentralized ecclesial structures such that they work in tandem with the established centralized church, the mechanism of centralized power must shift to power as agency—even in hierarchical systems where power is the organizational logic at work.

How might bishops conceive the charism of unity such that power entrusted to the role of bishop is exercised as collaborative, creative, transforming agency that sends the community to animate the mission of the church? Perhaps a potential approach is Boff’s suggestion that the charism of unity is best conceived to function as “integration and coordination.”\textsuperscript{535} The power of the bishop, then, does not compete with the community for authority, but “authors”\textsuperscript{536} the community to take the Jesus Norm into new contexts within the local spaces of everyday life. In other words, like the decentralized movements that are governed by the logic of mission, the centralized church also must in large measure transition from a model of power-over to that of

\textsuperscript{534} Charmain Levy, “CEBs in Crisis: Leadership Structures in the São Paulo Area,” in The Church at the Grassroots in Latin America: Perspectives on Thirty Years of Activism, eds. John Burdick and W. E. Hewitt (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), 171-172. More detail is provided in chapter three regarding the historical accounts of the division of the archdiocese and re-appointment of bishops by papal decision.

\textsuperscript{535} Boff, Ecclesiogenesis, 28.

\textsuperscript{536} Psychologist and author Dr. Eugene Kennedy, in Authority: The Most Misunderstood Concept in America, explains the dynamic of authority as a derivative of the verb, “to author” or “to augment,” meaning to create, to increase, to promote, to develop or grow. Authority is generative. He writes, “Authority generates life…. [it] does not settle for or remain within the relevant relationship but unbalances and breaks it open so that something new comes into existence.” Kennedy illustrates this using the authority of parents to “author” the flourishing and growth of their children, preparing them as their own “authors” in adulthood. Eugene C. Kennedy and Sara C. Charles, Authority: The Most Misunderstood Idea in America (New York: Free Press, 1997), 2.
power-to, so that the mission of the church is moved forward. In the final chapter, I will borrow
the imagery of a rhizomatic and arborescent governing metaphor from postmodern philosophical
thinkers and will further suggest as implications of this study a hybrid model for the
decentralized and centralized dimensions that work in tandem.

Second, Schüssler Fiorenza’s theoretical model of the *ekklēsia* of women met the criteria
for effecting ministry that preserved the memory of Jesus. The church, conceived as a
discipleship of equals, grounded the decentralized structure in the inclusive, egalitarian vision of
the *basileia*, as taught and lived by Jesus. The *ekklēsia* acquiesced to the Greco-Roman
kyriarchal culture and the church adopted the patriarchal structure, which it operates under today.

In actual ministry practices, Ruether notes that in some Women-Church groups there has
been development of women-centered and Goddess-centered liturgies. These liturgical practices
reenacted the redemption of women and their experiences as valid and authoritative—something
the patriarchal church has categorically overlooked. Nonetheless, as a predominantly white,
middle-class women’s movement, Women-Church has unwittingly universalized the narrow
experiences of one class and one race as normative for all women. The third-wave feminist
movement has critiqued early feminist theologians for their participation in the same oppressive
systems and denial of differing experiences of women of color, i.e., that of black, Latino, and
Asian women experiences, as the andro-centric norms did against white, middle-class women.\footnote{537}

\footnote{537} Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster
John Knox Press, 2005), 53-60; see also Delores S. Williams, “The Color of Feminism; or, Speaking the
Maria Isasi-Diaz, Kwok Pui-Lan, and Katie Geneva Cannon, eds., *Inheriting Our Mothers’ Gardens:
Lan asserts that from a postcolonial perspective, patriarchy must be interpreted with racial and ethnic
difference in view “because of the power difference implicit in the white gaze.” Specifically, her critique
of Women-Church lies in 1) the inability to translate academic language of “ekklēsia” and “wo/men” in a
postcolonial context, and 2) in Asian contexts, the church for women is associated with both patriarchal
authority structures and colonial power. Women-Church does not translate into solidarity for women.
Consequently, while the Jesus Norm functioned to inform Schüssler Fiorenza’s ecclesial model, in actual practice the scope of the redemptive vision was not comprehensive enough, and, understandably so, was biased by its own oppressive suffering. The practice of (white) women-centric liturgies in some Women-Church groups, however, demonstrates that the comprehensive scope of the redemptive Gospel project had not been normed by the vision of right ordered relationships across the whole cosmos of creation. As a result, the role of the centralized dimension of the church is necessary to preserve the integrity and cosmic scope of the Jesus-normed mission across all times and cultures.

**Conclusion**

The first half of the chapter identified a shift in structural logic from that of power in the hierarchical model to the logic of mission in the decentralized structures of the Catholic Worker, BECs, and Women-Church movements. Part II established that the logic of mission, which governs structures to mediate ministry and achieve the mission of the church, functions to anchor the movements in the Christian tradition and the origins of the early church. In the final analysis, the three movements adopted decentralized structures governed by the logic of functional mission rather than ontological power, as in the case of the institutional, hierarchical model. Consequently, as structures that have the capacity to move the mission of the church forward in the world, the decentralized nature does not make them unstable nor subject to fragmentation from the Christian tradition. Rather, in meeting the three criteria of the memory of Jesus, a communitarian spirit, and shared responsibility for the mission, the teaching and ministry of

outside the white, middle-class context. Interestingly, Kwok Pui-Lan observes that in response to the critique of universalizing white women’s experience, Schüssler Fiorenza broadens the scope of structural oppression; first, she articulated sexism as the oppression of a patriarchal system, then she develops the concept of kyriarchy to define the wide oppressive systems of classism, colonialism, and racism.
Jesus is continued in the world throughout history. Thus, the movements remain tethered to the Christian tradition and unified through animating a shared mission. In a concluding annotation based on anomalies reported by sociologists of actual on-the-ground practices within the movements, two significant points were identified in BECs and the Women-Church movements, particularly concerning the relationship of the decentralized structure and the hierarchical church as it pertains to the centralization of power and the role of bishops. I suggest that in re-envisioning the plausibility of decentralized ecclesial structures such that they work in tandem with the established centralized church, the mechanism of centralized power must shift to power as agency, and that the role of bishop reimagined. In a hybrid model of ecclesial structures, both the decentralized and centralized structures are governed by a structural logic aimed to achieve the church’s mission. Finally, I reaffirm the role of the centralized dimension of the church as necessary to preserve the integrity and cosmic scope of the Jesus-normed mission across all times and cultures.
CHAPTER SIX: IMPLICATIONS

“Plausibility of Decentralized Ecclesial Structures for a Post-Institutional American Catholic Church”

Introduction

In *Evangelii Gaudium* (Joy of the Gospel), Pope Francis cautions against ecclesial structures that function to prioritize the institution over the pursuit of the church’s mission. Such structures have impeded those who desire to be initiators and participants in the missiological imperative to which the church is called. He writes,

I dream of a “missionary option,” that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself.538

Decentralized ecclesial structures governed by the logic of mission remain largely unrealized in the Catholic Church. Richard Gaillardetz reminds us that “Vatican II did much to dismantle [the] pyramidal vision of the Church.”539 A centralized governance structure governed by power, however, will remain unchallenged until a viable model is imagined that retrieves the non-hierarchical, communitarian essence of the church. Theologian Gregory Baum writes, “According to a structural principle implicit in Catholicism, centralization must be


contained and balanced by decentralization.” The dynamic tension of these two dimensions in the church, especially under the pressing cultural circumstances of diminishing institutional relevance, must be held in tension. Amy Hereford, writing on similar cultural and ecclesial challenges faced by religious communities, proposes, “No organization is completely centralized or completely decentralized…. The key is to find the ‘sweet spot’ between centralization and decentralization that is appropriate.” Roger Haight articulates the dialectic tension of organization and environment evident in church history, expressed as the ongoing struggle between institutional maintenance and new missional ventures. On the one hand, its mission is outward-oriented to engage the world; on the other hand, the church must preserve its identity. “Thus both energy and structure must be devoted to this immediate goal. The tension promises dynamism and creativity on the condition of balance and dialectical interaction…. Too heavy an emphasis on either side of the tension can compromise the identity of the church in a flurry of activity or strangle its dynamic life.” Contemplating the tension of a changing world decades before Haight penned those words, Avery Dulles warned: “The Church must continue to provide a zone of relative stability and to enable the faithful to relate meaningfully to their religious past. But the Church must not allow itself to become a mere relic or museum piece.” Finally, Gerard Mannion poses the question succinctly: is “one dominant, centrally shaped and


‘defended’ ‘institutional’ paradigm the best-suited ecclesiology…. to facilitate the mission and development of Catholic Christian communities in the postmodern world’?

The institutional Catholic Church situated in postmodern society is facing challenges posed by the rapidly changing social and cultural forces of the twenty-first century. Drawing implications from the previous chapter, this chapter addresses Mannion’s question of the most effective model of ecclesial structures for the changing times. In chapter five, I argued that the Catholic Worker, BECs, and Women-Church movements, having rejected the primacy of power in the institutional and hierarchical model of church, adopted decentralized structures governed by the logic of mission. Though the movements are non-hierarchical in nature, they remain anchored to the Christian tradition. Mission-oriented structures drive the impulse to animate the mission of the church into the world, thereby establishing the movements in the life and ministry of Jesus and the origins of the early church. I suggested that decentralized ecclesial structures governed by the logic of mission are an effective and stable model for engaging in missional praxis. This chapter identifies that while the established centralized structure of the institutional Catholic Church is restrictive, the postmodern climate presents a unique opportunity to initiate decentralized ecclesial structures that catalyze mission-driven, innovative ministry at the parish and sub-parish levels. Future scholars might focus on a tandem model of decentralized and centralized structures that makes the horizontal and vertical dimensions structurally normative for the church of the future. We first begin with the signs of the postmodern times.

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Institutional Fatigue

The Pew Research Center released a report in May 2015 entitled “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” noting that while the overall number of Christian adherents in the U.S. has dropped by 8% since 2007, it is largely driven by a decline in the number of Catholics and mainline Protestants.545 An important factor to consider in the decrease of Christian adherents in the U.S. is the growth of the “nones,” those reported as “religiously unaffiliated” and that self-identify as atheists, agnostic, or “nothing in particular.” For example, more than one-third of the Millennial generation (born between 1981 and 1996) are considered religious nones. Only 16% of Millennials identify as Catholic.546 In addition, the statistical reporting group for the Catholic Church, the Center for Applied Research for the Apostolate (CARA), reported that approximately 2200 U.S. parishes were closed between 2000-2014, most of which were in the northeastern part of the country and largely affecting the archdioceses of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. The Midwestern states, including Ohio, were the second-largest areas affected.547

545 “America’s Changing Landscape: Christians decline sharply as share of population; unaffiliated and other faiths continue to grow,” May 2015, 4; http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/ (accessed February 2, 2016). Both Catholics and mainline Protestants contribute equally to the decline, at approximately 4%.

546 Ibid., 10-11; Pew Study PDF format.

Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York notes the challenge of sustaining parishes in the face of a rapidly changing cultural and demographic landscape: the “American Catholic leadership is being strangled by trying to maintain the behemoth of institutional Catholicism that we inherited in the 1940s and 1950s.”

Institutional fatigue is a sign of the changing tide of postmodern times. Theologians and sociologists have raised such concerns of post-institutional decline in the American Catholic Church. The Silent Generation (born 1928–1945) and the Boomers (born 1946–1964) sustain the workforce behind the established church in the pre- and post-Vatican II era; however, Boomers surprisingly make up a noticeable percentage of the religiously unaffiliated statistic at 17%. Characteristic of Generation X (born 1965–1980), they are disillusioned with the institutional church, yet tolerant; however, the Millennial generation has become indifferent if not immune to the conventions of the institutional infrastructure and its influence over their lives. Millennials, as the next generation to carry the heart of the church, do not share the same sense of duty to sustain the institutional model as do former generations of American Catholics. The once-successful parish system of the U.S. Catholic Church, supported and robustly staffed with volunteers from the pre-Vatican II and Vatican II generations, faces an


551 D’Antonio et al., American Catholics Today, 40.
unstable future without the younger generations to keep the institutional “behemoth” afloat.

What will the shape of the future Catholic Church look like?

**Signs of the Postmodern Times**

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, scholars have written on the phenomenon of a postmodern paradigm shift. American theologian and Hegelian scholar Peter Craft Hodgson writes, “There are signs all around us that the age of Enlightenment has run its course.”

He distinguishes three transitions in Christian history of paradigmatic magnitude: the classical, the modern, and the postmodern. The classical paradigm spanned a fifteen hundred year period from the patristic era to the Reformation. While this covers a large sweep of church history and contains a significant number of historical and cultural shifts, for his purposes, Hodgson characterizes this period of Christianity as “prescientific and precritical.”

The Age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century played a catalytic role in the epic transition from the classical epoch into the modern era. Human history saw tremendous progress and advancement in all realms of society, from philosophy and natural sciences to theology and political science; it was culturally turbulent and revolutionary for the Western world. The scientific revolution, establishing the scientific method as rational and authoritative, brought about the modern era characterized by the “age of reason” and the demand for empirical evidence of claims to truth. In contrast, the third and current period of transition is marked by disillusionment with modernity’s notion of progress. The drive for progress and the advancement to overcome the human condition was paramount in the modern paradigm. The events of the

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553 Ibid., 13-14.
twentieth century, however, were some of the darkest moments of human history; they challenged the notion of humanity’s progress toward an ‘Enlightened’ person. “The deep experience of evil in the twentieth century has permanently shaken confidence in historical progress: two world wars, fascism, Stalinism, the Holocaust, Vietnam, Cambodia, Central America, the ever-present threat of nuclear war.”

554 It seemed that humanity’s best attempt to reason ourselves out of human misery was an illusion. By the mid to late twentieth century, Hodgson observes, “we are situated in the time of a ‘passage’ of history—the passing of western bourgeois culture…. It feels as though we are reaching the end of a historical era.”

555 Swiss theologian and missiologist Walbert Bühlmann identifies a similar shift, suggesting that the third millennium of the church is “truly a new era, a ‘third age.’”

556 According to Bühlmann, the Eastern church dominated the first millennium; the Western church the second millennium. The third millennium is marked “with the irruption of the Southern church…the age of the world church.”

557 He notes that the “European Supremacy” of the church of the West is undergoing a period of transition and had reached its peak by the mid-twentieth century. Now, the center of ecclesiastical “gravity” in the west has shifted to the southern continents of Latin America, Africa, and Asia where the church has grown at a magnitude of six-hundred-fold over

554 Ibid., 14.

555 Ibid., 11.


557 Ibid., xii.
the last century. In the early twentieth century, 85% of all Christians were in the west; by 1970 the scale was tipped and 51% of Christians were in the global south.\(^{558}\)

Karl Rahner was first to articulate Catholicism’s shift to a “world-church.”\(^{559}\) Rahner believed that the Second Vatican Council was instrumental in moving the church from a homogenous European Catholic Church to a church that genuinely reflected the cultural diversity of the world. Up until the mid-twentieth century, the “church really remained a Western church with mission stations in other parts of the world. Today, as became evident during the Second Vatican Council, the church is beginning to become a world church.”\(^{560}\) John Allen in *The Future Church*, writing on the sweeping trends the church is facing, summarizes Rahner on the magnitude of this transition: “The significance of the shift to this world Church is on par with the transition in the first century from Christianity as a sect within Palestinian Judaism to a broad-based religious movement in the Greco-Roman world. ‘A frontier has been crossed.’”\(^{561}\) Richard Gaillardetz, in *Ecclesiology for a Global Church*, concludes, “We are living in the midst of a sweeping cultural transformation, and it is difficult to describe our situation other than in terms of what it is distinct from, namely modernity.”\(^{562}\)

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\(^{560}\) Karl Rahner, “Epilogue,” in Bühlmann, *Church of the Future*, 188.


The Church Decentered

Interest in the intersection of ecclesiology and postmodernity has emerged in the latter decades of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century.563 Paul Lakeland, in *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age*, explores the changing role of Christian community and its implication for the church in a postmodern context. He suggests that the church must come to terms with the fact that “[t]he Christian Church is decentered in the postmodern world.”564 The philosophical and scientific moorings of post-Christian society inevitably demand that the church reconsider its place in the new world. In his 1973 work entitled *The Shape of the Church to Come*,565 Rahner wrote of the displacement of the German church from the center of society. The church, according to Rahner, once a “homogeneous society” and indistinguishable in western society, would be subject to sociological and cultural conditions that would render it the “church of the little flock,”566 i.e., a community of believers who would increasingly be defined as a community on the margins and distinct within secular society. He wrote, the church “is a little flock in society and we shall become a much smaller flock, since the erosion of the preconditions of a Christian society within the secular society still


566 Ibid., 29.
continues and thus takes away the ground more and more from a traditional Christianity.”

Once dwelling at the center of a Christianized society, the church is being pushed to the margins. “To be Christian in a postmodern world, then, is to be decentralized as Christians, as human beings, in a lesser way and for many of us, as white, or male, or otherwise privileged.” In other words, the Christian church is no longer afforded a privileged seat in society.

**A Postmodern Opportunity to Reclaim Missional Structures**

For the decentered church, however, opportunities not available to the institutional church in the past are now present. In the new postmodern paradigm, the shift from a grand narrative to a local narrative allows the church to engage the world in personal and concrete ways. Because postmodern philosophical thought rejects the notion of a grand narrative, or overarching big story that governs a universalized interpretation of human history, values such as plurality, differentiation, multiplicity (verses duality), and hyper-locality become normative in postmodern society. Consequently, the illusion of “totality” as pre-existing universal reality is “de-legitimized” and replaced by “local narratives.” In other words, the stories of the neighborhood carry local authority and give ultimate meaning to concrete, personal, and collective experiences within a given sub-section of society. Concession to the authority of local narrative, and thus the dismissal of any illusion of homogeneous reality, offers a more realistic picture of the contextual diversity of human experience, of ethnicities, and of cultural distinctives in pluralistic society. According to Protestant theologian Stanley Grenz, reception of the local

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567 Ibid., 31.

568 Lakeland, Postmodernity: Christian Identity, 60.

narrative “heightens our ability to cope with our pluralistic situation.” As such, rather than interpreting the social and cultural changes as a threat to the long-established grand narrative of Christendom, the paradigmatic shift might be better understood as the “positive counterpart” to the seeming secularization of society.

The postmodern ideology that prioritizes social values of hyper-locality, diversity, and genuine charity towards difference is an opportunity for the church to retrieve a decentralized ecclesiology. Feminist theologian Mary Hines asserts that though the post-Vatican II period has reverted to an increased centralization, possibilities for greater local initiative exist. Hines maintains the belief that there is “a growing consensus at the grass-roots level and among many theologians that new life, new vision, and new structures will emerge out of the experience of the Church at the local level.” Reflecting on Rahner’s work, Hines states, “The increasing discomfort of trying to live a new vision within old structures has turned attention today, at least at the grassroots level, to imagining and modeling new forms in which a new reality of church can be realized.” The significance of Rahner attributing Vatican II to the beginning of the era of the “world-church” lies in the structural impact of the church at the local level. Hines suggests, “By world-church [Rahner] meant a communion of local, indigenous churches, each wholly church, whose combined reality would make up the whole, or universal, church.”

570 Ibid., 49.


572 Ibid., 174.

573 Rahner, “Basic Theological Interpretation,” 77-89.

For the church dreaming of a missionary “option,” the shift to a local narrative is good news. German and Feminist theologian Hedwig Meyers-Wilmes envisions a newly created office of the “koinonate.” She contends that ministerial roles exist within the public spaces of society, outside the traditional bounds of the parish. Postmodern society, now divided into smaller arenas of public life, requires that the church move out into such spaces, being “present in all these sub-areas without being ‘visible.” She asserts, in a postmodern climate “Christian faith is handed down in our society more than ever by persons and less and less by institutions.” Therefore, the koinonate is an effective way to “to go on the offensive in keeping the church present in many places. And it could get [the church] out of the dead end of hierarchical and dual appointments of offices.”

As envisioned by Meyers-Wilmes, the church can anticipate the locus of engagement within the concrete and diversified local contexts of a particular place and time. Rather than “utopias and grand-designs…a more limited but achievable attention to the local initiatives, tactical forays in the direction of a more human life in the here and now” presents itself to the church. As such, decentralized communities at the sub-parish (and reformed parish) levels can most effectively engage in innovative and creative missional praxis integrated within the local and tangible places of society.

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576 Ibid.

**Optimal Disequilibrium**

The period of cultural fluidity created by postmodernity offers the church a unique opportunity for renewal of its structures. According to philosopher John Caputo, “Genuine novelty happens” in a state of “optimal disequilibrium.”

Social and cultural instability of postmodernity fosters a state of “optimal disequilibrium” that effectively heightens the capacity for genuine novelty and creative change. According to Caputo, the current fluidity of the postmodern climate optimizes the possibility for innovative implementation of ecclesial structures at the smallest base ecclesial unit. Given the opportunity presented, can the centralized structures of the institutional Catholic Church yield to an upsurge of creative missionary activity at the sub-parish levels of the church?

Caputo suggests that while both the Catholic and Protestant churches are capitalizing on the opportunity for novel and creative mission in the postmodern milieu, the focus on an incarnational approach is most effective. Protestant Millennials have predominantly led the church as initiators of a mission-centric outreach at the grassroots level in American churches in recent years and perhaps can offer insight for Catholic Church leaders. For example, Josh Packard, sociologist of religion, reports that the Protestant Emergent Church movement has been successful in leveraging the climate of optimal disequilibrium by creative engagement at “hyper-

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local” levels of the church and society. The movement is a decentralized, mission-oriented model of church organized as a loose network of local base communities that crosses denominational boundaries. The churches intentionally encounter their neighbors through collaborative partnerships with those they live among. As a hyper-local network of communities, it is structurally suited to engage small geographical locations: a neighborhood, a single city block, or an urban public school. Churches aim to organize and collaborate with neighbors to bring about social, economic, or ecological transformation of a community to see the reign of God realized in tangible ways. The mission of the church is realized through efforts such as peacemaking efforts, drug rehabilitation efforts, racial reconciliation events, and by addressing systemic issues of urban poverty. For example, theologian Michael Frost recounts such an experience of the church emerging organically in a neighborhood in Pittsburgh:

Deeply committed to Christ, [the owners] obviously exude his love and grace because their [tattoo] parlor has become a hangout for a whole community of recovering alcoholics, working people from the neighborhood, college students, single moms, a punk-rock band, and a pierced and spiky-haired collection of iconoclasts. Who would have imagined that a tattoo parlor could be a missional third-place?... By emulating Christ’s mercy and kindness, they have fashioned a supportive and safe space for dozens of leather-clad, pierced and tattooed people who normally wouldn’t be churchgoers.

The decentralized ecclesial structures are able to facilitate engagement in concrete, personal acts of solidarity and transformation and, as such, render missional praxis normative in the Emergent Church movement.

For the Catholic Church, opportunities for missional praxis at hyper-local levels are limited; initiative most typically occurs at the top levels of the hierarchical church. For example,

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Pope Francis has persistently demonstrated a missionary mandate through his actions with those located in the margins of society: he washes the feet of prisoners, kisses the face of the disfigured, and gives preferential attention to the poor. While the Pope’s actions have been effective as a model to emulate, the over-centralization of the church stands in the way of a fuller realization of Francis’ missionary ecclesiology in the particular church. He notes this disadvantage in *Joy of the Gospel*: “Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church’s life and her missionary outreach.” 582 Therefore, how does the church at the grassroots initiate a genuinely novel approach as participants in the missiological impulse? Caputo offers a grim conclusion on the limitations imposed by a centralized structure: “In Roman Catholicism, you [i.e. the laity] are impotent, so you just walk away rather than re-invent.” 583

In the Emerging Church model we hear the echo of Pope Francis’ call for a church of missionary disciples: “The Church which ‘goes forth’ is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step…. boldly take the initiative, go out to others, [and] seek those who have fallen away…. An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives.” 584 In the same manner, the three decentralized movements explored earlier in this study—the Catholic Worker, BECs, and Women-Church—were able to carry out a missionary praxis, notably as movements identified with the Catholic tradition.

Two contributing factors have been identified in the success of the movements: 1) the capacity to retrieve the logic of mission which informed the movement’s decentralized structure;

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582 *Evangelii Gaudium*, 32.

583 Caputo, “Good News of Postmodernity.”

584 *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24.
and 2) the implementation of a decentralized structure that facilitates engagement in hyper-local, incarnational praxis with those whom they intended to live out the Gospel message. The decentralized structure facilitated the community’s capacity to animate the mission of the church in the world such that the work of Christ is continued in history.

While the postmodern climate creates great potential for the local church, the centralized structures so definitive to institutional Catholicism inhibit innovative, missional engagement initiated at the local church level. Structural change is needed if the Catholic Church is to navigate the shifting cultural landscape of postmodernity. Given the cultural and sociological shifts of an emerging postmodern society that create a unique opportunity for renewal of structures at the most basic level of the Catholic Church, decentralized ecclesial structures as modeled by BECs, Women-Church, and the Catholic Worker movements, conceived in tandem with centralized structures and organized to mobilize the church for creative and innovative approaches to its missionary imperative, are a plausible option for the post-institutional Catholic Church in the twenty-first century.

**A Future Study in Hybrid Ecclesial Structures: The Rhizomatic Imagination**

The Catholic Worker, BECs, and Women-Church movements offer a viable model for the decentralized dimension of the church, in tandem with the established centralized structures, as structurally normative for the Catholic Church. In introducing the rhizomatic and arborescent imagery drawn from the postmodern, philosophical work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, it is possible to conceptualize the multiplicity of organizational structures and offer as a model decentralized and centralized ecclesial structures working in collaborative tension. I intend only to put forward the material as a potential future study for which the post-institutional church might navigate the challenges posed by postmodernity. Nevertheless, the rhizomatic and
arborescent motifs offer much by way of a tandem structural logic and could prove helpful in envisioning the future shape of the church.

Rhizomatic and arborescent motifs afford the church a novel way to think about decentralized structures in a systemic way that works in tandem with the established hierarchical church, thereby maintaining the tension of centralization and decentralization so vital to Catholic ecclesiology. In *A Thousand Plateaus* twentieth-century French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Felix Guattari developed post-structural, postmodern concepts of space and power that have had growing appeal in many arenas of contemporary life since its English translation in 1988. Rhizomatic logic, drawn from the natural phenomenon of the rhizome as a horizontal root system with growth projections in multiple directions, challenges hierarchical organizational assumptions in western society. The implication has broad appeal across the disciplines, from information sciences (e.g., the internet) to ethnic studies to non-hierarchical approaches in organizational theory.\(^{585}\) The rhizomatic imagination proposes a way to conceive the world as a multiplicity of interrelated connections. For Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome metaphor is well-suited to illustrate postmodern realities in philosophical and political thought.

*Introduction to the Rhizome*

The rhizome is a subterranean stem system that sends out both horizontal roots and vertical shoots but has no hierarchical center or control. “In contrast to centered... systems with hierarchical modes of communication and reestablished paths, the rhizome is an acentered, non-hierarchical, non-signifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or

central automation." A rhizomatic system has “neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overspills,” and, as such, can connect at any point and in multiple dimensions to bifurcate and to send out new vertical shoots or horizontal roots. “The rhizome assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers.” In organizational terms, the rhizome is a network of interrelated entities that have the capacity to bifurcate into multiple open connections and in variable directions as a process of multidimensional growth and development.

Deleuze contrasts the rhizome with that of an arborescent image, or the tree, anchored by a single taproot. The tree represents hierarchical systems as the basis for all binary, linear, top-down logic. He uses the tree image to describe arborescent systems in which transmission is along the taproot and trunk axis only, noting that the center is the place of “significance and subjectification.” In such systems, an element lower on the tree “only receives information from a higher unit, and only receives a subjective affection along pre-established paths.” He borrows from Pierre Rosenstiehl and Jean Petitot who reject central structures (called “command trees”) as primary systems. “[A]ccepting the primacy of hierarchical structures amounts to giving arborescent structures privileged status…. An individual has only one active neighbor, his or her superior…. The channels of transmission are reestablished: the arborescent system preexists the

587 Ibid.
588 Ibid., 7.
589 Ibid., 18.
590 Ibid.
individual, who is integrated into it at an allotted place.” Deleuze concludes, “Such is indeed the principle of roots-trees, or their outcome: the radicle solution, the structure of Power.”

**Structured to Change and Expand**

In rhizomatic systems, the nature of the rhizome is to change and to expand. “[T]here is always this idea of ‘becoming’—the notion that objects, identities, ideas and discourses are always in the process of making a transition from one form to another.” Bifurcation is their generative nature—to send out roots or shoots and to expand or break off, and multiply. It continually reconstructs the network of interrelations and “produces both shoots (new lines of flight) but also roots (i.e. it feeds back into the wider environment/assemblage from which it is nourished and nurtured).” The capacity to change and grow signifies vitality within the system. The rhizome is a “moving matrix” that “ceaselessly connects and reconnects… [creates and recreates] and produces lines of flight.”

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591 Ibid., 519, n15. Deleuze quotes Rozenstiehl and Petitot from “Automate asocial et systems agentries,” *Communications*, no. 22 (1974), 45-62. In the footnote on Rozenstiehl and Petitot, Deleuze writes, “The principle characteristic of the centered systems is that local initiatives are coordinated independently of a central power, with the calculations made throughout the network (multiplicity).”

592 Ibid., 18.


594 Ibid., 231.


The Rhizomatic Imagination Informs Structures of Mission

British theologian Chris Baker applies rhizomatic logic to the field of practical theology to reimagine new ministerial practices in the midst of social and economic fluctuations of urban contexts where traditional hierarchical systems have been unsuccessful. Baker writes, “Rhizomatic practical theology ‘deconstructs’ existing ecclesial discourses and structures in order to describe and proclaim imaginative futures.” As such, the rhizomatic imagination, as a governing model for ecclesial structures, can offer several systemic implications for the church in search of decentralized structure that is normative and that has the capacity to animate localized mission.

First, it has the capacity to envision decentralized structures as a systemic solution for implementing decentralized communities at the local church level. Theologian James Drane, writing a few years after the close of Vatican II, called for the reform of structures based on the “microscopic rather than the macroscopic patterns” of the church. He writes, “We bring her organizational patterns more in line with Christian ideals as well as make them more adequate instruments for accomplishing her mission by renewing the smaller units of the Church. This is accomplished by a grass roots program working up from the bottom rather than a grand ideological re-orientation which we hope will magically alter everything below it.” For example, while Vatican II was successful in retrieving a local ecclesiology, the Council’s ability to implement decentralized ecclesial structures and to bring them into alignment with the vision of Vatican II fell short. Hans Küng notes, “All those essentially biblical impulses and motives were in the post-conciliar period increasingly constricted into narrow channels by pope, curia, __________


598 Drane, Authority and Institution: A Study in Church Crisis, 75-76.
and finally by the bishops."\(^{599}\) Paul Lakeland writes, "It would certainly seem that the efforts of Vatican II and beyond to build a communion ecclesiology represented steps in this direction, yet so much in Catholicism remains undeniably hierarchical."\(^{600}\) Gaillardetz suggests, "An ecclesiology of communion views the Church as a fundamentally relational reality. The structures and concrete exercise of ecclesial authority must reflect this life of communion."\(^{601}\) A rhizomatic imagination has the potential to inform a systemic decentralized implementation of ecclesial structures that does not diminish, but works in tandem with the established hierarchical structures of the church.

Second, ecclesial structures, conceived through the unceasing generative nature of the rhizome, can ensure an ongoing “missionary option” as normative through established decentralized structures. In rhizomatic logic, new “lines of flight,” or missional endeavors, are naturally birthed out of indigenous communities, who in turn animate the mission of the church in other places and times. Such a system does not give an opportunity for the missionary impulse to stagnate nor to become obstructed by centralized power and authority as in the hierarchical tree model. Vatican II’s *Decree on Christian Missionary Activity* articulates this missionally-driven vision for the church:

Thus from the seed which is the word of God, particular autochthonous churches should be sufficiently established and should grow up all over the world, endowed with their own maturity and vital forces under a hierarchy of their own, together with the faithful people, and adequately fitted out with requisites for living a full Christian life, they should make their contribution to the good of the whole Church.\(^{602}\)

\(^{599}\) Hans Küng, *Reforming the Church Today* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 54.


\(^{602}\) *Ad Gentes*, 6.
A third implication of rhizomatic imagery is that the generative capacity to bifurcate is not only a sign of vitality but also the key source of revitalization for the established church. This characteristic is particularly germane given the realities of institutional fatigue, as well as the indifference younger generations feel about the church. Pope Francis acknowledges the merit of decentralized movements within the larger established church: “[B]asic communities and small communities, movements, and forms of association are a source of enrichment for the Church, raised up by the Spirit for evangelizing different areas and sectors. Frequently they bring a new evangelizing fervor and a new capacity for dialogue with the world whereby the Church is renewed.”\textsuperscript{603} The BECs in Latin America serve as an appropriate example of the potential of newly emerging communities to revitalize the established church when decentralized structures are governed by the logic of mission and function to continually birth new communities.

\textit{A Tandem Model}

The rhizome and the tree, as an image of the decentralized and centralized dimensions of ecclesial structures, are intended to work in collaborative interdependence. Baker credits Deleuze for making centralization a necessary role in overall structural systems: “Deleuze…recognizes we still need trees.”\textsuperscript{604} Nevertheless, he also notes a necessary shift in the mechanism of centralized power and how it is exercised by the established church: “The insights and traditions of ecclesial understandings are required to ground and critique emerging conceptual understanding, but in a way that creates new spaces and does not shut off dialogue.”\textsuperscript{605} The

\textsuperscript{603} \textit{Evangelii Gaudium,} 29.

\textsuperscript{604} Baker, “Roots and Shoots,” 231.

\textsuperscript{605} Ibid.
responsibility for reforming centralized power lies in the function of the bishop. Pope Francis, having already called for renewal of structures at the sub-parish and parish levels, turns his attention to the bishops’ role in restructuring the church to become more mission-oriented:

The bishop must always foster this missionary community in his diocesan church…. To do so, he will sometimes go before his people, pointing the way and keeping their hope vibrant. At other times, he will simply be in their midst with his unassuming and merciful presence. At yet other times, he will have to walk after them, helping those who lag behind and—above all—allowing the flock to strike out on new paths. In his mission of fostering a dynamic, open and missionary communion, he will have to encourage and develop the means of participation…. [T]he principal aim of these participatory processes should not be ecclesiastical organization but rather the missionary aspiration of reaching everyone.\footnote{Evangelii Gaudium, 31.}

Of the three tasks with which the bishops were charged, that of “allowing the flock to strike out in new paths” holds potential for reimagining the exercise of power in hybrid decentralized and centralized ecclesial structures. The image of “striking out in new paths” carries notions of the rhizome that bifurcates and sends out a new “line of flight.” The overlap of the decentralized and centralized functions becomes apparent. How, then, can the role of the bishop facilitate the creative, innovative, generative, participative process of sending out the church onto new paths for the sake of its mission? Two considerations for reform can be leveraged that are appropriate to the question: 1) reconceiving centralized power such that bishops are “authors” of the community’s call to mission, and 2) reconsidering the unity of charism as that of “animation and inspiration.”\footnote{Boff, Ecclesiogenesis, 32.}

\textit{The Role of Bishop in Authoring Mission}

In the shift to a “missionary option” for the church, how does the hierarchical church, and the role of bishops in particular, exercise power for the sake of mission? Christine Hinze, as
noted previously, articulates two mechanisms of power: power-over and power-to; the first exercises power as superordination and the second as transformative agency. In a comprehensive understanding of power, both mechanisms are necessary. Depending on the context and the intended outcome, the kind of power exercised can change, even in ecclesial contexts. “The most adequate analysis of power, then, will apply a multifaceted model that raises up both the enabling and constraining, and the superordinating and collaborative dimensions of power, incorporating both in a critical manner appropriate to orienting theological convictions.”

In other words, there are circumstances when a coercive means of power is necessary, and other times when power is better used to transform, create, envision, animate, and inspire new possibilities in and for others. The role of the bishop has traditionally embodied the former; however, in the task of “allowing the flock to strike out in new ways,” the instinct to empower becomes greater than the temptation to impede.

Establishing such a clerical culture means that the ecclesiastical authority of the bishop is granted in the interest of advancing the mission of the church, to lay open new “lines of flight” by which communities can engage the world. Psychologist and author Eugene Kennedy in *Authority: The Most Misunderstood Concept in America* explains the dynamic of authority as a derivative of the verb “to author” or “to augment,” meaning to create, to increase, to promote, to develop, or to grow. Authority is generative and relational. “Authority generates life…. It does not settle for or remain within the relevant relationship but unbalances and breaks it open so that something new comes into existence.” Kennedy uses the illustration of parents who “author” the flourishing and growth of their children. In the case of ecclesiastical power, the bishop might

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exercise power to author or to bring to life a “dynamic, open and missionary communion,” to foster missional fervor so that the community is inspired to creatively bring about a new work of Christ into the world. “Power experienced that way encourages people, lays open spaces and places to play, lets people breathe and see, agree and disagree. Power in these postmodern times will be postmodern creativity juggling the different, the ambiguous, the fragmentary, in new and creative ways.”

The power entrusted to the bishops, therefore, is to inspire and animate the community to move the mission of the church forward in the world.

Charism of Unity as Animation and Inspiration

In the task of rethinking the mechanism of ecclesiastical power, the implications upon the charism of unity within hybrid ecclesial systems is important to consider. How might the charism of unity serve to foster cohesiveness among decentralized movements without dependency on the hierarchal structure? Boff’s critique of the linear model of descending power claims that the laity are excluded from the realm of hierarchical function, particularly in decision-making roles. Just as important, however, is the access the laity has to the bishops. Boff notes, “In this style of relationship the bishop…does not enter into direct contact with the faithful, but only with the priest.”

In the institutional model, it is not necessary that the bishop nurture communitarian bonds with the people in which he has spiritual oversight. Boff describes the existing BECs model in which the laity, priest, and bishop are networked in relationship with one another as a circular model; the bishop and the priest, as animators and inspirers of unity, dwell within the community among the people. The charism of unity “does not reside in accumulation and

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611 Boff, Ecclesiogenesis, 28.
absorption, but in integration and coordination.” In Boff’s new model, the bishop serves to animate the whole community and inspire them towards mission, in collaborative unity with other churches in their pursuit to move the mission forward. The question for future studies is: How then can the role of the bishop, as an office of the centralized church (the tree), serve to unify the multiplicity of the rhizomatic dimensions of the mission-driven church as authors and animators of the church’s mission without the use of power-over measures?

Dorothy the Bishop

Drawing upon the decentralized movements from earlier in this study, Dorothy Day is an unlikely choice for reimagining the unifying role of the bishop; however, she was an exemplar in bridging autonomous Catholic Worker communities without depending on a hierarchical structure nor exercising coercive power to ensure adherence and uniformity within the movement. Instead, she masterfully developed relationships through communication as an instrument of unity. Day leveraged many avenues of communication that nurtured a strong sense of relational (and voluntary) unity across the movement. As cited earlier, within three years of the first issue, subscription to the Catholic Worker newspaper reached 150,000. Day peddled the paper in bulk to parishes, schools and seminaries, and the message of the movement was broadcast widely. Besides Peter Maurin’s relentless “indoctrination” of anyone who crossed his

612 Ibid.
613 Roger Haight recognizes communication and intercommunication as a major “structure” by which the early Christian communities retained a sense of corporate unity. He writes, “Christianity began with missionaries from Jerusalem and probably other groups in Galilee. It spread through trade, travel, and communication. The apostle (Paul) was itinerant…. Messengers were sent; letters written; visits made. A sense of solidarity marked the movement as a whole, and some sense of responsibility.” Unity in the early church was non-negotiable. The priority of unity was evident in communication between communities. For example, in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he laid out the basis of unity to the churches: one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God. Haight, Christian Community, Vol 1, 107.
path, Day traveled across the country doing speaking tours. Her itinerary often included visits to college campuses to engage the younger generations in social concerns.

In addition, Day played a critical role in sustaining the inter-relations between established Worker houses and new start-ups, thus strengthening the sense of unity across the network. While Day was alive, she maintained personal relationships with the other houses through visits and a vast number of personal letters, empowering new directors to strike out on their own.

Robert Ellsberg writes,

Her life also involved constant letter writing: acknowledging and thanking contributors, responding to queries from priests and church officials, answering critics, exhorting and encouraging fellow Catholic Workers around the country…. In every case she connected intensely with the needs of her correspondents, just as she did with the people close at hand. In reading and replying to letters, Dorothy responded not just to the particularities of the moment; she saw her correspondents’ struggles, their yearnings, their sufferings in relation to the universal human condition, and as a part of a drama that linked this life and the life to come.\(^{614}\)

As noted in an earlier chapter, Day maintained a degree of interaction and collaborative friendship with the other Catholic Worker communities. Rather than a sense of rivalry or a competitive spirit, particularly with those who held differing views, she created a sense of collaboration and mutual dependency between the communities. “She modeled a practice of friendship that reached beyond the boundaries of her movement,”\(^ {615}\) and, subsequently, her friendship fostered a unity within the movement.

After Day’s death, the relational bond between Worker communities did not diminish, but thrived because of the sense of unity created between the houses. The ongoing success and sustainability of the Catholic Worker as a social movement, according to Dan McKanan, is due


\(^{615}\) McKanan, *The Catholic Worker After Dorothy*, 23.
to the “horizontal development of relations between [Worker] communities.” As such, the Worker Houses became interdependent for support and encouragement. Even today, for example, those who desire to start a Catholic Worker House are encouraged to tour various communities before forging ahead in starting their own House. This investment in the network serves to further foster collaborative relationships across the movement and to establish lines of communication between the Houses. In the tenuous times of running a Worker House, such relational bonds are especially helpful to a community when founders need personal encouragement and guidance.

Through Day’s ongoing efforts to establish personal relationships and to communicate across the network, she empowered others to send out “new lines of flight” in the vision and spirit of the Catholic Worker movement. She exercised the charism of unity as animator and inspirer of the vision and mission of the Catholic Worker movement without reliance on a hierarchical structure for unity and cohesion. Dorothy Day is a model for envisioning the charism of unity in a new hybrid model of ecclesial structures informed by a rhizomatic imagination.

Conclusion

Paul Lakeland’s imagery of the institutional church “on hospice” is useful for coming to terms with the diminishing effectiveness of an old model in a new world. It is not a proposal to abandon the centralized function of the church, but to accept the transition of the institutional church into a new shape that is informed by a kingdom ethic while remaining anchored in the tradition of the church.

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616 Ibid., 27-28.
The rhizomatic and arborescent imagery is a novel way to systemically conceive of ecclesial structures as both decentralized communities and centralized hierarchy. On one hand, as existing and viable decentralized movements, the Catholic Worker, BECs and Women-Church have demonstrated the capacity to successfully respond to the world’s needs and to generate new lines of missional activity. The rhizomatic imagination, in a sense, is already appreciably operative in the Catholic Church. On the other hand, the two structural dimensions of the church struggle to exist as an integrated model that works in tandem to animate the mission of the church into the world.

In *Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis extends an invitation to the church to be bold and creative in envisioning new structures, styles, and methods that will enable the church to realize the dream of a “missionary option.” Admonishing the church, he writes, “Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: ‘We have always done it this way.’” Perhaps the vision for ecclesial structures includes something analogous to both the rhizome and the tree—decentralized and centralized dimensions structured to work in collaborative tension to bring Jesus and his mission into a visible expression in the smallest corners of society. The challenge presented to the church in envisioning a new shape, however, is to let go of methods and practices that no longer prove as effective as they have in the past, as well as forsaking the false hope for a renaissance of the “golden age” of the institutional church. In the spirit of Pope Francis’ words, the call to abandon an institutional mindset that resists new models and structures is the challenge the Catholic Church must embrace for the sake of its future.

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617 *Evangelii Gaudium*, 33.
The Catholic Worker


**Base Ecclesial Communities of Latin America**


Women-Church


Riley, Maria and Diann Neu, eds. Women Moving Church. Washington, DC: Center of Concern, 1982.


**General Bibliography**


