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REIMAGINING CATHOLICITY: AN INTERSTITIAL PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Throughout the first years of his papacy, Pope Francis has consistently reiterated the significance of *encounter*. In his first Pentecost homily, he claims that it is only when the Church steps beyond itself and goes to the peripheries that it becomes

...ready for encounter. For me, this word is very important. Encounter with others. Why? Because faith is an encounter with Jesus, and we must do what Jesus does: encounter others... with our faith, we must create a 'culture of encounter,' a culture of friendship, a culture in which we find brothers and sisters, in which we speak with those who think

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differently, as well as those who hold other beliefs, who do not have the same faith.¹

Inspired by the language of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis emphasizes that Christianity is intrinsically social and communal in its desire to participate in and contribute towards the salvation of the world. For Pope Francis, a culture of encounter possesses soteriological value because it is concerned with the healing of social bonds. In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, he emphasizes that “God, in Christ, redeems not only the individual person, but also the social relations existing between people” (EG 178). This exhortation invites Christians to move beyond superficial relationships and into the interconnected, wounded relationality that shapes both society and the church, shifting the social and ecclesial paradigm towards a *redemptive* encounter with God and neighbour.²

Cultivating a culture of encounter *within* the Church involves the healing and humanizing of social bonds wounded by participation in Latinization, colonization, and Eurocentric white supremacy. With this goal in mind, my dissertation argues that we must reimagine catholicity from an interstitial perspective. This perspective locates catholicity not only between the cultural differences that mark the Roman Catholic church, but also the ecclesial differences between the Western and Eastern churches of the Catholic communion. The “third space” that emerges at the interstices between faith communities becomes a space of encounter, which not only forces the enunciation of difference, but also the question of the nature of catholic unity amidst difference. This hermeneutical shift to the interstices requires a corresponding epistemological shift to an interstitial perspective that is more sympathetic to encounter, more responsive to the growing socio-cultural consciousness of unity-in-difference, and more attentive to the vocation to be leaven and pilgrim.

Outline

To ground this theological reimagination of catholicity, the first chapter explores five major theological expressions of catholicity throughout the history of Christianity. The first part of this chapter considers the gradual loss of catholicity. Prior to Constantine, the

¹Pope Francis, *Homily*. Vigil of Pentecost with the Ecclesial Movements, May 18, 2013, accessed February 28, 2018, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130518_veglia-pentecoste.html.

²He draws his perspective from the conciliar teachings found in *Lumen Gentium* 17 and *Ad Gentes* 5.

early church expanded through missionary encounters that followed routes of trade and migration. The anonymous author of the Letter to Diognetus captures the diasporic consciousness of early catholicity found in these small, scattered faith communities when he writes that, “every foreign land is for them a fatherland and every fatherland a foreign land.”³ This initial consciousness of catholicity, however, is gradually subsumed by the ascendancy of the imperial church, marking the first major shift in catholicity. As conflict slowly prevails over unity, catholicity becomes equated with orthodoxy, fracturing the church along linguistic and cultural lines that exclude Syrian (Asian) and Coptic (African) expressions of the faith. Finally, as greater centralization of the Western Latin church coincides with the Age of Discovery, catholicity is reinterpreted as juridical uniformity and geographic extension, particularly expressed through the crusades and European expansionism.

Having established the loss of catholicity, the second part of chapter one then charts its gradual recovery. Recognizing how previous understandings of the relationship between unity and difference damaged the catholicity of the church, the *nouvelle théologie* movement in France tries to reverse this harm by insisting that catholicity is a qualitative universality; a universality born of the common origin and common destiny of humanity that seeks redemptive reconciliation so that God may be all in all. This revision of catholicity sets the stage for the discovery of catholicity as unity-in-diversity at the Second Vatican Council. As Karl Rahner so famously expressed, “the Second Vatican Council is... the Church’s first official self-actualization as a world Church.”⁴ He likened the contemporary shift from a Western Church to a world-Church with the biblical shift from Jewish Christianity to Gentile Christianity. The latter is not a quantitative augmentation of the former, but rather a qualitative leap in salvation history, guided by the Holy Spirit.

Chapter Two analyses how these conciliar insights on the relationship between unity and diversity are received into the life of the global church, which undergoes rapid socio-cultural change immediately after the end of the Council. This chapter begins by acknowledging how the Council’s inability to anticipate the forces of globalization lead to conflicting visions of conciliar reception. Both a centripetal and centrifugal orientation develop in response to

³Gerald G. Walsh, trans., “Letter to Diognetus,” *The Apostolic Fathers*, Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1947, 361.

⁴Karl Rahner, “Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 40 (1979) 717.

understanding the relationship of the unity of the whole to the diversity of its parts. While the former emphasizes the necessity of a strong Roman papacy to navigate rapid socio-cultural changes, the latter contributes a vision of pneumatological communion that takes difference seriously. With both trajectories generated from the centre, their arguments eventually create an impasse that is unable to make further progress. The liberationist perspective, however, envisions catholicity from the periphery and disrupts the binary between the centripetal and centrifugal orientations by placing the poor at the centre and asking the church to migrate to the peripheries and share in the powerlessness of the margins. This ecclesiological vision revitalizes a focus on the human condition of the church and the vocation to live as leaven and pilgrim in service of God's kingdom.

While the liberationist perspective disrupts the binary between the centripetal and centrifugal perspectives generated by the centre, it too is unable to fully account for the socio-cultural irruption of migrants in the context of globalization, which brings the peripheries to the social and ecclesial centres of power. In his call for a new catholicity for the church, Schreiter claims that while the once-peripheral peoples are disrupting the homogenous narratives of dominant cultures and awakening a reflexivity among them, such reflexivity has always been a

part of the life for the poor, the disadvantaged, and the migrant. The "double consciousness" of the dispossessed—of themselves and of how others view them—has long been part of their experience, chronicled already by W.E.B. DuBois in 1903. Today as Homi Bhabha has averred, "the truest eye may now belong to the migrant's double vision."⁵ It is those who do not benefit who see both the promise and the profound contradictions that mark the encounter of the global and the local.⁶

This encounter between the global and the local, which occurs in a third space between, is reminiscent of the diasporic consciousness expressed in the Letter to Diognetus. Chapter Three, therefore, turns to postcolonial theory in order to understand the nature of this third space of encounter, which has the potential to expose "both the promise and the profound contradictions" that characterize the wounds of entangled histories within the church. Part One of this chapter considers postcolonial arguments regarding the limits of the

⁵Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, 7-8.

⁶Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004, 56-57.

centre-periphery binary and the necessity of a hermeneutical shift to the interstices of third space. It makes this argument with a specific focus on the Asian, Latinx, African, and European roots of US Roman Catholicism. Part Two will then analyse the corresponding epistemological shift to a contemporary diasporic consciousness that adds new dimensions to the ecclesial vocation to exist spatially as leaven—the people of God amidst the peoples of the earth—and transform society from within.

While postcolonial theory elucidates the spatial dimensions of interstitiality, Chapter Four turns to the social sciences to understand the temporal dimensions of existing in-between. The first part draws on anthropologist Victor Turner's theory of *liminality* and *communitas* to explore the interstitial implications of this theory for ecclesiology. Given this framework, the chapter then analyses the interstitial insights gained from twenty-two months of participant-observation and in-depth interviews at three Eastern Catholic churches in the Greater Boston area—the Ge'ez Catholics of Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Syro-Malabar Catholics from South India, and the Melkite Catholics from Lebanon and Syria. This analysis examines the diasporic consciousness of these three churches in light of both the temporal liminality of their migration histories to the US and their liminal existence on the edges of Catholic consciousness. Chapter four will conclude with how this concrete analysis equips the US church to remain faithful to its interstitial vocation as pilgrim between the promise and the fulfilment.

Chapter Five concludes this study by explicitly reimagining catholicity from an interstitial perspective in light of the simultaneous vocation to be redemptive leaven that heals the social bonds among the peoples of the earth and a pilgrim people of God called to live in communion with one another. This reimagination of catholicity seeks to provide a theological framework that better responds to the challenges of globalization and the cultivation of Pope Francis' culture of encounter *within* the church. It accomplishes this end with specific attention to the third spaces that emerge from the liturgical assembly gathered in worship and a synodal vision of the church. The challenges not only include the already mentioned need to heal relationships fragmented by Latinization, colonization, and white supremacy, but also the possibility of responding to the ethical, ecumenical, and eschatological implications of catholicity with attention to what emerges between the global and the local, the promise and the fulfilment.

Contribution to the Field

The contribution of this dissertation is twofold. First, my work extends theological reflection on catholicity in a way that builds on yet goes beyond the contributions of Vatican II. By attending to the third space of encounter from the interstitial perspective, the Church can identify logics of domination such as Latinization, colonization, and white supremacy that seriously wound its capacity to maintain a fruitful tension between unity and difference. Only by working towards the healing of such wounds *within* the Church, can it faithfully become “a sacrament—a sign and instrument” of “communion with God and the unity of the entire human race” (LG 1).

Second, this dissertation responds to the call within “the discipline of theology for some new and more challenging forms of ecclesiology.”⁷ Nicholas Healy argues that we must become more aware of what is often considered secondary, namely the concrete church *in via*. We must engage with “disciplines that bear upon the concrete identity of the church, namely history, sociology, and cultural analysis or ethnography.”⁸ By specifically attending to the concrete experiences of cultural difference within the US Roman Catholic Church and the relationship between this local church and three diasporic Eastern Catholic churches, this dissertation outlines the challenges and promise of catholicity for the Church as it exists interstitially in space as leaven—the people of God amidst the peoples of the earth—and in time as pilgrim between the promise and the fulfilment.

⁷Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World, and the Christian Life: Practical-prophetic Ecclesiology*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2000, 1.

⁸Healy, *Church, World, and the Christian Life: Practical-prophetic Ecclesiology*, 155.