

Communion Ecclesiologies as Contextual Theologies

BRIAN P. FLANAGAN
Marymount University

This article argues that the predominance of communion language in ecclesiology in the past fifty years frequently functions as another instance of the universalization of a theological position rooted in a particular, dominant context—the fragmented, post-traditional world of the late twentieth-century West. First, it briefly discusses the concept of a contextual theology. It then traces three of the major contexts in which communion ecclesiology developed: the ecumenical movement and its desire for a new language of Christian unity, the Roman Catholic community's desire for language pointing to the spiritual/theological reality of the Christian church, and the broader cultural context of fragmentation and real or perceived disintegration of community found in late-modern Western societies. Finally, the article looks at some examples of ecclesiological reflection occurring outside of the dominant consensus of communion ecclesiology: the work of José Comblin in Latin America, and that of Elochukwu Uzukwu and other theologians of the church in African contexts.

Keywords: church, ecclesiology, communion ecclesiology, contextual theology, ecumenism, José Comblin, African ecclesiology

SPIRITAN Father and Nigerian theologian Elochukwu Uzukwu's 1996 book *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* remains one of the more important ecclesiologies written from an African perspective.¹ Uzukwu addresses issues of ethics and ecclesial polity, offers a framework for the relation of the local churches of Africa to the worldwide Christian church, and identifies resources from various peoples and

¹ Elochukwu Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

Brian P. Flanagan is assistant professor of theology at Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia. His research interests include ecclesiological method, communion ecclesiology, and the work of Jean-Marie Tillard, OP. His latest work is Communion, Diversity, and Salvation: The Contribution of Jean-Marie Tillard to Systematic Ecclesiology (London: T & T Clark, 2011).

traditions available for the renewal of the Christian church in African contexts. He speaks a great deal about some of the major questions addressed in many of the “communion ecclesiologies” developed by theologians in the North Atlantic nations: unity and diversity, local church and universal church, reconciliation and mutual interdependence. Yet despite the book’s subtitle, *Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*, nowhere in this work is the language of “communion” central to Uzukwu’s ecclesiological reflections. This is meant as an observation, not as a critique—Uzukwu’s ecclesiology is complete without it. Yet why include *Communion* in the subtitle?

Rather than carelessness, I can suggest one possible explanation for Uzukwu’s, or his editors’, choice: the predominance of communion language in contemporary ecclesiology, and the need to point toward the dominant linguistic paradigm in order to have one’s ecclesiological voice heard. In other words, contemporary ecclesiology, particularly contemporary ecclesiology rooted in the academy, might listen to Uzukwu’s *Listening Church* only if he packaged it in ecclesiological language Western theologians found familiar.

The genesis of the research presented in this article began with a historical question that quickly became a personal question: in addition to the possibility that they might say something true about the nature of the church, why did communion ecclesiologies in the last third of the twentieth century say something *popular* about the nature of the church? That is, if one can find the elements that constitute ecclesiologies of communion going back to the earliest reflections on the church, and an explicit attempt to give the notion of “communion” a prominent place in a systematic ecclesiology as early as the work of Friedrich Pilgram in 1860,² why did the language of communion come to dominate ecclesiological reflection across denominational and ideological/political lines beginning in the late 1960s? Why were the values and strengths of this ecclesiological concept particularly attractive in this period, and, perhaps most importantly, to whom? And, following on that history, and despite many communion ecclesiologies’ best efforts to maintain, even to promote quite actively, the diversity of the churches, what voices and strategies might the dominance of communion ecclesiology ironically exclude?

If “communion ecclesiology” is as contextual as any other theology, then analysis of communion ecclesiology as contextual will assist in using it carefully rather than allowing it to uncritically dominate ecclesiological discourse.

2 See Friedrich Pilgram, *Physiologie der Kirche* (Berlin, 1860), cited in Yves Congar, “Peut-on définir l’Église?,” in *Jacques Leclercq: L’homme, son œuvre et ses amis* (Tournai: Casterman, 1961), 248–50.

By using the concept of contextual theology as a heuristic rather than a methodological term, I hope in this article to focus attention on the historical and cultural situatedness of communion ecclesiology within a particular “experience of the present,” as Stephen Bevans uses the term,³ for three distinct yet related reasons. First, attention to the contexts within which the notion of “communion” became dominant will contribute to understanding its genealogy and some of the distinctions between the various “visions and versions” of communion ecclesiology.⁴ Second, analysis of the contextuality of communion ecclesiology will help in determining the contexts in which this aspect of the church can continue to be “good news,” strengthening, challenging, or influencing that context. The third (and in some ways primary) reason is to draw attention to the limitations of communion ecclesiology that arise from its situatedness. While some way of addressing the realities of ecclesial unity-and-diversity and unity-in-difference might be a necessary component of any ecclesiology, the centrality of that issue in Western or North Atlantic ecclesial contexts, or in the dominant institutions within those contexts, may not extend beyond them. Communion ecclesiology might not be the “good news” of the church for all times and places, and the assumption that communion ecclesiology can function as an *ecclesiologia perennis* may hinder or hide the voices of theologians and churches putting forward theologies of the church in their own time and place.

This article proceeds in three parts. First, I briefly discuss the concept of “contextual theology” in recent scholarship and distinguish my use of the term to analyze the history of communion ecclesiology from the more common understanding of contextual theology as indicative of reflexive awareness of the contextuality of one’s theologizing. Second, I trace three of the major contexts in which communion ecclesiology developed in the twentieth century. Two of these contexts are thoroughly ecclesial and have been studied before in connection with communion ecclesiology: the ecumenical movement with its desire for a new language of Christian unity, and the Roman Catholic community’s desire for language pointing to the spiritual and theological reality of the Christian church. The third context, both more nebulous and possibly more interesting, is the broader cultural context of fragmentation, loss of meaning, isolation, and real or perceived disintegration of community found in late-modern Western societies and increasingly communicated through the structures of globalization. Finally, the article looks at some examples of ecclesiological reflection occurring outside of the dominant

3 Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 7.

4 Cf. Dennis M. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology: Visions and Versions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).

consensus of communion ecclesiology as examples of perspectives that exclusive focus on the question of ecclesial unity and diversity might miss. The first, the work of José Comblin, argues against the dominance of communion ecclesiology from the perspective of Latin American liberationist Christianity. The second, broader category looks at visions of the church from African contexts in which the question of the church's mission on behalf of human flourishing, and reflections on the church as the Family of God, provide alternate starting points for contemporary ecclesiology.

1. Contextual Theology

What do I mean by categorizing communion ecclesiology as a “contextual theology?” I am drawing on what has become the almost classical treatment of the idea of contextual theology outlined by Stephen Bevans in his *Models of Contextual Theology*. He begins with the programmatic statement “There is no such thing as ‘theology’; there is only *contextual* theology.”⁵ Before outlining his models of contextual theology, Bevans presents his framework as that which “takes into account the faith experience of the *past* that is recorded in scriptures and kept alive, preserved, [and] defended ... in tradition,” and “the experience of the present, the *context*” in terms of personal and communal experience, culture, social location, and social change.⁶ These four categories provide a flexible framework with which to analyze “the experience of the present” and to allow theologies to become consciously aware of their location in a particular, complex context. Many factors obviously might fall under the headings of personal and communal experience, culture, social location, and social change, however, and Bevans's models, as well as many examples of self-aware contextual theology, demonstrate the variety of methodological and theological possibilities one might explore.

In her study *Doing Contextual Theology*, Angie Pears makes an important distinction “between the claim that *all* theology is contextual and the claim that *some* Christian theologians and Christian theological communities are explicitly and fundamentally incorporating their own context into their theologies.”⁷ The term “contextual theology” is more often used to describe this second group of theologies, namely those explicitly and reflexively self-aware of their contextuality, those that attempt through their theologizing to share the particularity of their faith with the wider church. Discussing

⁵ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷ Angie Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology* (London: Routledge, 2010), 7–8.

“contextual theology” as a methodological concept, as a way of doing theology, is therefore the most common referent for the term.

Nevertheless, taking seriously the first half of Pears’ distinction suggests that “contextual theology” also has the potential to function heuristically in historical or critical analysis of a particular theologian or theological movement, and it is this possibility that I would like to pursue in this article. With some exceptions that prove the rule,⁸ very few of the ecclesiologies centered on the concept of communion are contextual theologies in the methodological sense of the term. Nevertheless, analyzing the personal and communal experiences, cultures, social locations, and social changes that contextualize these theologies assists us in better understanding them. While not determined by their contexts in a mechanical way, theologies are created by theologians, and theologians are human beings with biographies, cultural locations, ecclesial affiliations, and so forth that condition their research, suggest some questions and concepts to be crucial, and other areas of investigation to be marginal or uninteresting. Approaching theologies as contextual is a useful heuristic device for uncovering some of these particularities.

This is not a new idea; the very idea of historical theology is based on some practice of “the fusion of horizons” between a familiar context and an unfamiliar past context.⁹ But identifying and naming the contextuality of a contemporary or recent ecclesiology not only assists in understanding it but also has ethical and political implications, “calling out” the local as local, and preventing a geographically, politically, or institutionally dominant ecclesiology from being misunderstood as an *ecclesiologia perennis*. Naming some of the contexts in which communion ecclesiology has developed and flourishes assists not only in understanding communion ecclesiology’s particular strengths and weaknesses but guards against its being misunderstood as a de facto “universal ecclesiology.”

2. Contexts of Communion Ecclesiology

In my previous work, I have outlined in more depth the historical origins of the use of *koinonia* language in Christian ecclesiology in the twentieth century.¹⁰ There I pointed to two major streams from which communion

8 See, for example, Leonardo Boff’s social trinitarian communion ecclesiology in *Trinity and Society* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988) and *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).

9 See Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev.ed., trans. and rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1993), 302–7.

10 See Brian P. Flanagan, *Communion, Diversity, and Salvation*, Ecclesiological Investigations 12 (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 24–43.

ecclesiology developed, rooted in two (at first) distinct ecclesial contexts and concerns. The first was the ecumenical movement and its theologians' questions about how to discuss Christian unity in a diverse and currently divided church; the second was the Roman Catholic Church and its theologians' questions about how to treat the church's spiritual/theological reality in connection with its institutional structures. I here also address a third context that increasingly appears to me to underlie them both: the context of late modernity, of a fragmented "secular age" as experienced by Christian communities and by scholars in North America, Western Europe, and Australia, for whom concern about a loss of meaning, anxieties about a loss of community, and the experiences of pluralism and forms of secularity made them particularly receptive to the ecclesiological themes at the center of communion ecclesiology.

The Ecumenical Movement

While obviously rooted deeply in the Christian tradition as a whole, the language of *koinonia* or "communion" achieved new importance in ecumenical Christian ecclesiology in the latter half of the twentieth century in response to a particular practical question of the ecumenical movement: how to speak about Christian unity across the diversity and the divisions of the Christian churches in a way that admitted of different degrees of Christian unity—how, in other words, to speak of Christian unity as a matter of more and less, rather than a matter of presence or absence. Drawing on earlier language of fellowship and *Gemeinschaft* in the traditions of the Western Reformation churches, and increasingly on Orthodox understandings of *koinonia* rooted in eucharistic and trinitarian theologies, ecumenical leaders and theologians found in the language of communion a way of noting the unity their churches already shared in Christ, the extent to which the presence of that unity did not rule out a continuing absence of unity, and a vision with which they might imagine a reunited church of Christ marked by reconciled diversity in theology and practice.

For example, at the level of multilateral dialogue, the continuing project of the Faith and Order Commission to produce a consensus statement on the church has resulted in two major study documents, *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* and *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, both of which use *communion* as a central term.¹¹ In the more recent text, currently

11 Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, Faith and Order Paper 181 (Geneva: W.C.C., 1998); Faith and Order Commission, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, Faith and Order Paper 198 (Geneva: W.C.C., 2005). See also Paul M. Collins and Michael A. Fahey, eds., *Receiving*

being received and responded to by the churches, the language of the church as a fellowship or communion runs throughout the document,¹² and is programmatic in the sections on unity, diversity, and the local church, as well as in the accompanying “boxes” for further study and discussion of differences.

Similarly, at the same time as these multilateral statements were being produced, bilateral agreements between various churches also began to make use of communion language more frequently. Here the work of Elaine MacMillan on the use of communion language underpinning conciliarity in the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) dialogues,¹³ that of Lorelei Fuchs, SA, on the Lutheran, Anglican, and Roman Catholic dialogues,¹⁴ and that of Nicholas Sagovsky on Anglican and Roman Catholic dialogues¹⁵ are most significant in outlining how communion language has functioned in bilateral statements in recent years.

The centrality of communion language in these documents also formed a context in which some of the more important ecclesologists of the last third of the twentieth century and today have reflected on the nature of the church. While not without certain dangers, as Michael Kinnamon has pointed out,¹⁶ the ecumenical movement itself functions in many ways as a form of ecclesial community and a distinctive experience of the present—as a context, in other words. The particular ecclesial context of theologians like John Zizioulas, Jean-Marie Tillard, Mary Tanner, Thomas Best, and Paul Avis, among others, while working within and with their Christian churches of origin, has arguably been as much the community of worldwide ecumenists as it is their home communities. While difficult to generalize, that community of worldwide ecumenists has some characteristics: a passionate desire for Christian unity that views the unity of the church as a central, rather than peripheral, concern; a faculty for negotiating difference and seeing distinct

“*The Nature and Mission of the Church*,” *Ecclesiological Investigations 1* (London: T&T Clark, 2008).

12 Faith and Order Commission, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, §§ 10, 11, 12, 13, 24–33, 34, 42, 49, 55, 57–58, 60–63, 64–66, 74, 79, 97, 99, 111, 116, 117.

13 Elaine Catherine MacMillan, “Conciliarity in an Ecclesiology of Communion: The Contributions of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission’s ‘Final Report.’” (PhD diss., University of St. Michael’s College, Toronto, 2000).

14 Lorelei F. Fuchs, SA, *Koinonia and the Quest for an Ecumenical Ecclesiology: From Foundations through Dialogue to Symbolic Competence for Communionality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

15 Nicholas Sagovsky, *Ecumenism, Christian Origins, and the Practice of Communion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 18–41.

16 Michael Kinnamon, *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How It Has Been Impoverished by Its Friends* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003).

formulas as potentially complementary rather than necessarily contradictory; and a deep respect for institutional structures—deeper, perhaps, than the helter-skelter ecumenism occurring on the ground in societies like that of the United States. What I would like to add to this list, to be frank, is a cosmopolitan outlook on the world different from that of most Christians, made possible and reinforced by the travel and institutional support required for high-level ecumenical dialogues, despite the genuine commitment of ecumenical leaders to try to remain rooted in the experience of the churches worldwide.

The forms of communion ecclesiologies arising from this stream of thought, therefore, not only address the particular question of envisioning Christian unity at the heart of the current ecumenical impasse. They also reflect the attempts of theologians to read the Scriptures and tradition of the church in conversation with a worldview deeply aware of pluralism, generally optimistic regarding the goodness of that diversity, and concerned above many other ecclesial goals with the restoration of the unity that Christ desires for the church. As important as Christian unity may be, that focus may not be the only or most worthwhile goal for the church or for a theology of the church, as ecclesiologies developed in other contexts place other values and goals at the center of their projects.

Roman Catholic Ecclesiology

A second major stream of ecclesiological reflection on the church using the notion of communion is more confessionally identified with the Roman Catholic Church, and this stream differs from that of the ecumenical movement in its use of communion language, because it differs in the aspect of the church it is trying to emphasize. For Roman Catholic ecclesiology, I have suggested, communion language functioned as one of the strategies pursued in the twentieth century to include attention to the spiritual/theological reality of the church in an ecclesiology that had often been focused primarily on the church as a canonical, institutional reality.¹⁷ Edward Hahnenberg, focusing only on the development of communion ecclesiology within Roman Catholic circles, has also traced that history from its preconciliar origins through today. He presents a framework based on the thought of Walter Kasper, consisting of two distinct approaches: an “Aristotelian” approach that has much in common with the ecumenical trajectory in its focus on the particular, and a “Platonic” approach focused more on the ideal and universal, which is the dominant approach in most official

17 Flanagan, *Communion, Diversity, and Salvation*, 32–43.

Roman Catholic documents today.¹⁸ But like the language of the church as the “Mystical Body” and the “People of God,” the church as communion was in my judgment primarily a way for Roman Catholic ecclesiology to point to the underlying spiritual relationships of the members of the church and to connect those relationships to institutional structures, either to justify current practice or to argue for substantive reform.

An illuminating illustration of this is the work of Yves Congar. Congar is often indicated as a founding voice in communion ecclesiology, but unlike Jérôme Hamer, he did not devote an entire work to the concept of communion. Timothy MacDonald, however, identifies “the Church as a Communion” as a “dominant aspect in a synthesis,”¹⁹ that is, as a major theme in the proposed “total ecclesiology” to which Congar makes reference in *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'église*,²⁰ and which, despite the long process and developments that Rose Beal outlines in her important research,²¹ never was completed.

Like Hamer, Congar opens some of the possibilities that communion language provides for reworking the traditional treatise *De Ecclesia* beyond earlier institutional and juridical frameworks. It is crucial here to notice that for Congar “communion” functions as one half of the matched pair “communion-institution,” which MacDonald recasts as “life” and “structure,” and which Gabriel Flynn elsewhere refers to as “community” and “institution.” At least in his proposed *De Ecclesia*, Congar began using “communion-institution” language in 1948 in place of more classic “invisible-visible” language.²² While vigorously opposed to what he thought of as a “Protestant” error of separating the two in favor of the “invisible church,” Congar was just as vigorously opposed to collapsing the distinction or undermining their mutual dependence. In this use of communion language Congar can be seen as being in significant continuity with the trajectory of those in Catholic ecclesiology over the past century who were using communion language to promote Roman Catholic attention to the spiritual

18 Edward P. Hahnenberg, “The Mystical Body of Christ and Communion Ecclesiology: Historical Parallels,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005): 16–30.

19 Timothy I. MacDonald, *The Ecclesiology of Yves Congar: Foundational Themes* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 207–10.

20 Yves Congar, *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'église* (Paris: Cerf, 1950), 7 n. 1, cited in MacDonald, *The Ecclesiology of Yves Congar*, 208. Newly translated by Paul Philibert: Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011).

21 Rose Beal, “In Pursuit of a ‘Total Ecclesiology’: Yves Congar’s ‘De Ecclesia’, 1931–1954” (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 2009).

22 See Beal, “In Pursuit of a ‘Total Ecclesiology,’” 233–34.

nature of the church. While obviously Congar was also an ecumenical pioneer, his use of communion language, unlike the stream of communion ecclesiology developed explicitly within ecumenical dialogue statements, is less concerned with addressing the question of diversity and unity, and more centered on continuing to quicken appreciation for the church's fundamental reality as a spiritual communion coming to expression through its institutional structures.

The situatedness of Congar's ecclesiology within his own context and location, especially his personal biography, can be demonstrated by comparison with another prominent Roman Catholic use of communion in ecclesiology, that developed by Joseph Ratzinger, both as a private theologian and later as the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). Congar's personal sufferings at the hands of the "system," as he called it, are well known, and have become better known through the publication of his diaries (what could be crueler than exiling a Frenchman to England?).²³ The focus of Congar's ecclesiology on the underlying spiritual communion of the church functioned in many ways to critique the centralization of the Catholic Church and to open pathways to make that institutional structure better reflect and serve its spiritual communion. Without dividing the institutional and theological realities of the church in a (broadly) Protestant fashion, Congar's ecclesiology is critical of the preconiliar authoritarian structures of the Catholic Church and focuses on its spiritual nature in order to critique those structures.

At the same time, what Gerard Mannion has labeled the "official," 'top-down' version of *communio* ecclesiology" was being developed,²⁴ most prominently in the work of Joseph Ratzinger, in which the language of communion continued to be used to focus on the church's spiritual/theological reality but tied that theology even more tightly to the current "neoexclusivist" institutional structures and universal focus of the Roman Catholic Church. Ratzinger's overall ecclesiology, spread across his personal theological writings as well as in statements made while he was Prefect of the CDF, is too complex to summarize in this context.²⁵ But a dominant feature of

23 See, for instance, Alberto Melloni, "The System and the Truth in the Diaries of Yves Congar," in *Yves Congar: Theologian of the Church*, ed. Gabriel Flynn (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 277–302.

24 Gerard Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 44.

25 Some of the major collections of ecclesiological essays available in English are Joseph Ratzinger, *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996); Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology* (New York: Crossroad, 1988); Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as*

Ratzinger's ecclesiology, expressed through the idea of communion, is the ontological priority of an ideal, universal church, and the near identification of three forms of communion: that joining humanity and God in Christ, that joining Christians with each other, and that joining the members of the church with hierarchical officeholders. Like Congar's, Ratzinger's communion ecclesiology uses communion language to present a theology of the church rooted primarily in its spiritual and theological reality, but his particular construction closes the space between "communion" and "institution" that Congar attempted to open.

Gerard Mannion and others have argued that Ratzinger has narrowed the understanding of ecclesial communion to a concept more synonymous with hierarchical communion, and in his role as the head of the CDF has attempted to define an "authentic" communion ecclesiology marked by a focus on the universal over the local and on hierarchical structures over ecclesial existence experienced "from below." I share his judgment that such "an ecclesiology of 'communion' can be just as authoritarian and life-denying as any political society and/or hierarchical model of yesteryear."²⁶ In fact, as Mannion suggests, such a "top-down" ecclesiology may be even *more* life-denying because it is tied to a more attractive idealist ecclesiological vision; in broad terms, any critique of a particular ecclesial structure might make one a radical, but a more forceful critique of the ecclesiology that underlies that structure might make one a heretic.

What might be pursued further, however, is not just the internal Roman Catholic argument between two visions of communion ecclesiology, but the contextuality of both sides of this argument. More obvious, perhaps, to the critic of this "official" communion ecclesiology (a criticism that I share) is the context of power and justification of that power that stands behind and conditions its theologizing. Nevertheless, unless one judges that the official use of communion in ecclesiology is simply a co-option of the early theology, it remains to be seen why such a centralizing, hierarchical ecclesiology and a more local, decentralizing ecclesiology, in addition to the ecumenical version of communion ecclesiology addressed above, all found the language of communion so suitable for expressing their vision of the church. It is to this third,

Communion (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005). The most important doctrinal statement is Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Some Aspects of the Church Understood as a Communion (*Communio in notio*)," *Origins* 22 (25 June 1992): 108–12. A fuller summary of Ratzinger's ecclesiological thought, with substantive excerpts, can be found in Gerard Mannion, "Understanding the Church: Fundamental Ecclesiology," in *The Ratzinger Reader*, ed. Lieven Boeve and Gerard Mannion (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 81–118.

²⁶ Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity*, 60.

shared context for the genealogy of communion ecclesiology that I now wish to turn.

3. Modernity/Postmodernity/A Secular Age

This aspect of my analysis of the context for communion ecclesiology is admittedly both the most difficult to express and the most fraught with potential pitfalls. But when we speak of the contextuality of communion ecclesiology, I think it crucial to locate it temporally, geographically, and culturally in the late-modern, post-1960s, North American and European “West.” There are a number of possible ways of approaching this period theoretically, and even of naming it, as “modernity,” “late modernity,” “postmodernity,” and so forth. One of the characteristics of this period that recurs in numerous analyses and social theories is the experience of fragmentation, loss of meaning, awareness of radical pluralism, and fragility of identity—all of which are experienced as threatening. In the ecclesial context, this has also been accompanied by the consolidation of Charles Taylor’s “secular age”: not necessarily widespread secularization, as he points out, but the sense among believers and unbelievers alike of the non-givenness of explicit religious belief.²⁷ This has been accompanied in many countries by a radical decline in church attendance or identification with institutional religious practice, and the proliferation of multiple religious forms in new religious communities, spiritualities, and so on.

It is far beyond the scope of this article to try to give a full account of modern reality (Taylor tried to do so for one aspect of our current situation, and it took him more than nine hundred pages). But one aspect of the experience of Western modernity that seems to help make sense of the appeal of communion in ecclesiology, whether of the ecumenical variety or one of the Roman Catholic schools, is late-modern anxiety over the fragmentation or perceived fragmentation of community, as well as the reactions against individualism that these experiences have provoked. In the words of the American sociologist Robert Putnam, many of us either are, or are afraid that we are, “bowling alone.”²⁸ Additionally, we are increasingly aware not only of the fragility of our identities and communities, but also of the radical pluralism within our societies, a pluralism that includes some hard lines of division between communities.

If some of this analysis of contemporary Western society is true, then this might help explain the attractiveness of the vision that communion

27 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

28 Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

ecclesiologies present to modern Western Christians. If alienation from community and isolation as an anonymous consumer are experienced as a deep threat by many individuals, then something like Congar's or Zizioulas' theology of the church as a place of community, relationship, and personhood is indeed "good news" for members of fragmented North Atlantic societies. If many experience a globalizing world in which identities seem more fluid, yet at the same time the frightening "other" seems much closer, then something like Jean-Marie Tillard's theology of a church where former enemies and strangers are saved by being reconciled into a new form of community is a deeply attractive vision of the possibilities of the Gospel. And, more negatively, even a vision of ecclesial communion as constituting a faithful remnant, a "community of the saved" standing alone against the threats of the modern world, as in some versions of the "official" Catholic communion ecclesiology of Joseph Ratzinger, still addresses, it seems to me, some of the anxieties of modern Western communities.

I would suggest that something like these attractions and motivations begins to explain some of the dominance of communion ecclesiologies in the North Atlantic Christian churches in the past thirty years, and why they will continue to be attractive, pastorally valuable theologies for some time to come. Speaking personally, communion ecclesiology as a way of appreciating and even celebrating the diversity of the church in a postmodern world has been deeply attractive to me as a theologian and as a believer as a way of avoiding the sterility of mutually indifferent tolerance and the comparable hardness of a neoexclusivist fortress mentality.

But even if the trends of economic and cultural globalizations are increasingly propagating these experiences and these anxieties outside of their societies of origin, ought theologians not first approach them as contextual theologies, crafted within a concrete context in response to a specific situation? Are the issues of ecclesial disunity, of institutional and communal identity, and of late-modern fragmentation and pluralism the most important aspects of ecclesiology in other contemporary contexts? In more marginalized communities within late-modern Western societies, or in Christian communities in the Two-Thirds World, might an ecclesiology centered on communion—ironically even a theology that understands itself as celebrating diversity—not be another artificial imposition of a dominant contextual theology as though it were a universal ecclesiology? A brief look at some of the ecclesiologies being developed on the margins of mainstream academic and ecclesial theology suggests that this may be the case—that the good news of the reality of the church might in some places be something different than communion.

José Comblin and the Church of Liberation

In his book *People of God*,²⁹ the late liberation theologian José Comblin wrote powerfully about the eclipse of “people of God” language in Roman Catholic ecclesiology in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and its replacement by a version of communion ecclesiology focused on the hierarchical and spiritual aspects of the Catholic Church. This “reversal” of the ecclesiology of Vatican II culminated, Comblin argues, in the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, whose Final Report asserted that “the ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the Council’s documents.”³⁰

At first glance, Comblin’s argument seems most similar to that of Gerard Mannion and other critics of a hierarchically focused communion ecclesiology; like Mannion, Comblin points to the way in which communion language functions in this ecclesiological vision by emphasizing the church’s participation in the divine over its concrete human reality, its transcendence over its historicity, and, at root, its hierarchical leadership over its people. “In practice,” Comblin writes, “the only visible reality in the church worthy of being singled out is the hierarchy.”³¹ But Comblin goes further than Mannion in critiquing communion from his context in Latin America, and in his liberationist attention to the reality of conflict and the struggle for justice within and without the church.

Comblin’s work is a vibrant ecclesiology rooted both in the Second Vatican Council’s understanding of the church as the “people of God” as well as in the Latin American experience of the church as a people. He traces the history of postconciliar Latin American Catholicism as a rediscovery of the vitality of the people at the base of the church, and particularly of the experience of that people as poor and as called to liberation from structures of injustice within society and the church. For Comblin, the language of “people of God” was a privileged way of raising the consciousness of the Latin American church of itself as a people, and the replacement of “people of God” language by communion language at the 1985 Extraordinary Synod was intended to reverse, rather than deepen, the postconciliar experience of the church, especially in Latin America, as a people called to liberation. Communion language, Comblin argues, can dangerously paper over the realities of division caused by injustice and smother the necessarily conflictual impulse to resist injustice. “Obviously, a church of pure communion

29 José Comblin, *People of God*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004); Comblin, *Povo de Deus* (São Paulo: Paulus Editora, 2002).

30 Extraordinary Synod of 1985, “A Message to the People of God and the Final Report,” *Origins* 15 (19 December 1985): 441, 443–50.

31 Comblin, *People of God*, 55.

cannot explain conflicts and struggles, the diversity caused by these conflicts, clashes of mindsets, projects, sensitivities, and cultures. A communion has no conflicts.”³²

Comblin’s witness, therefore, is an example of how communion ecclesiologies developed within the ecumenical movement or North Atlantic Roman Catholic ecclesiology might fit poorly at best and function malignantly at worst in promoting reconciliation without repentance, a peaceable communion rooted in the preservation of an unjust status quo. Even beyond the particular issue of hierarchical and centralizing tendencies within the Roman Catholic Church, if Comblin’s experience and analysis hold weight, then theologies of communion focused on reconciled diversity and mutual appreciation of otherness, however well grounded in Scripture and tradition, will not be “good news” in contexts marked by conflict and injustice. An ecclesiological focus on the good of otherness can easily be used to maintain structures of injustice if victims are pressured to appreciate the otherness of their oppressors, or if the poor are asked to enter into loving communion with the rich, without also addressing the sinfulness that led to these forms of otherness. This should serve as a caution for the use of communion ecclesiology in other contexts as well—it can easily be seen how discourses of diversity that can be foundational to the project of reconciliation can easily be utilized to leave in place structures of inequality that prevent real communion. For example, celebrating a Spanish-language Eucharist and making sure one member of the parish council is Latino/a no more addresses the current power differentials between Anglos and Latinos/as in the U.S. Catholic Church than does electing an African American president signify the end of racial injustice in the United States. Rhetorics of diversity, tolerance, and communion, even when they provide a powerful vision toward which the church is striving, can easily undermine the difficult work needed to achieve real communion if they are wielded uncritically or in isolation.

Ecclesiologies in Africa

Communion ecclesiologies might also fail to be adequate not because of ideology but because of sheer difference in context. One excellent counter-trend to the dominance of communion ecclesiology, I would argue, is the flourishing of African Roman Catholic ecclesiologies, like that of Elochukwu Uzukwu, that are largely indifferent to the rhetoric of communion. Whether as individual works of ecclesiology (like that of Uzukwu) or more often as aspects of wider theological projects available in translation to Western

³² Ibid., 59.

academic audiences, African theologians' thought on the church often adverts to the language of communion but quickly moves past to express their experiences of church and vision for its possibilities in different language.

The dominant language of African ecclesiology has been the church as the "Family of God," both in the work of individual theologians and in official statements like the "Message" of the 1994 Special Assembly of Bishops for Africa and Madagascar.³³ In his *African Theology in Its Social Context*, for example, Zairean theologian Bénézet Bujo outlines the possibilities of a christological and eucharistic "proto-ancestor ecclesiology" rooted in a Christology of Jesus as the life-giver at the source of the church-family.³⁴ Similarly, the Nigerian Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator, in *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, creatively enters into dialogue with his compatriot Chinua Achebe to present a theology of church as family that draws on African understandings of family while also challenging those understandings with a vision of a family of God broader than clan or tribe, and freed from the negative structures of dominance sometimes found in ordinary families.³⁵

And as mentioned at the outset, Uzukwu's text, one of the best African ecclesiologies easily accessible to Western theologians, also draws on the language of church as family as the "facilitator of relationship in an interdependent world" to ground his vision of the local churches in Africa.³⁶ Primarily known for his work on liturgical inculturation,³⁷ Uzukwu begins his ecclesiology in an attempt to take account of "African reality," of Africa as a "face with many scars."³⁸ He grounds that account in social analysis of colonial and postcolonial African history, materials selected from the traditional cultures and institutions of some African peoples, and examples from the classical African Christian past, especially that of Cyprian of Carthage and the North African churches of the late Roman Empire. From these sources he raises three major issues for the churches of Africa themselves and for the universal church. First, from an internal perspective, he writes about the need to retrieve a relational notion of the human person

33 Available, along with many of the preparatory and subsequent documents, at <http://afrikaworld.net/synod/index.html>.

34 Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, trans. John O'Donoghue (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 92–114.

35 Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 81–93.

36 Uzukwu, *A Listening Church*, 66–103.

37 See Elochukwu Uzukwu, *Worship as Body Language. Introduction to Christian Worship: An African Orientation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997).

38 *Ibid.*, 1.

within African society in order to combat violence between individuals and between ethnic groups on the continent. Writing in the immediate aftermath of the Rwandan massacres, Uzukwu emphasizes the church as the potential nucleus of reconciliation and respect for human rights in the divided contexts of sub-Saharan Africa.

Second, he addresses the issue of ecclesial autonomy in relation to African autonomy vis-à-vis the Western world. Drawing on Cyprian as well as the conciliar emphasis on the value of the local church, Uzukwu's theology of ecclesial inculturation calls for the African churches to claim their local authority and autonomy as well as to recognize the responsibilities to the wider universal church that such autonomy entails. The image of church as family, as used by Uzukwu, has implications not only for relationships between individuals but for relationships between continents, between North and South, between former colonizers and the formerly colonized.

Finally, Uzukwu addresses questions of relationships within the African church, particularly between church leaders and their people. Ministry in an African context, he writes, needs to be "ministry with large ears," that is, ministry that draws on consistent practices of listening in order to avoid forms of clericalism and centralization that neglect the voices of local clergy, laypeople, and especially women.

It is striking that these three issues—reconciliation between divided peoples and ethnic groups, just relationships between northern and southern nations and churches, and fruitful collaboration between ecclesial leaders and their churches—are central to some ecclesiologies of communion but are here addressed creatively and productively without reference to that body of discourse. Uzukwu and the other African theologians mentioned above do not directly challenge the idea of the church as communion but are working out an ecclesiology independently of that theology's language and rhetoric. Even Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz in *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, when discussing "Communion Ecclesiology from an African Perspective," place it within a chapter on the church as the Family of God and translate the language of communion into an African, proverb-based theology of relationships.³⁹ These small but important examples should serve as a warning against a one-size-fits-all-churches ecclesiology, even one as explicitly concerned with the promotion of intraecclesial diversity as Western communion ecclesiology. One could speculate that the difference between contemporary African societies, increasingly globalized yet less immersed in the secular age of the North Atlantic world, might be one

39 Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 128–33.

explanatory difference in context. The real or perceived isolation of individuals from each other, or the lack of experience of extended family structures in a nuclear family-centered society, might plausibly make “communion” a more attractive metaphor for the church than “family.” In another direction, the relative lack of African investment in the historical divisions of Christianity in western Europe might make the ecumenical division for which communion ecclesiology was in part developed a less salient pressure upon theological reflection. But these examples suggest not an ignorance of contemporary North Atlantic communion ecclesiology, but rather a judgment by African theologians that the rhetoric and language of that ecclesiology are neither adequate nor particularly necessary to the task of making sense of the church in their particular contexts.

While a full study of the sources of these differences is beyond the scope of this article, if even possible as the work of a single theologian, the differences themselves provide enough material for the overall conclusion: communion ecclesiology, while historically significant and of continuing importance within many contemporary ecclesial contexts, remains a contextual theology and needs to be interrogated as such on a case-by-case, context-by-context basis. With Comblin one can fear its use as an ideological weapon to undermine other ecclesiological positions. Or, given the examples drawn from African ecclesiology, one can simply be more mindful of the situatedness and limitations of communion ecclesiology. For those of us for whom communion language has provided crucial vocabulary for addressing the reality of ecclesial unity in our contexts, perhaps especially for those of us most attracted to this way of moving deeper into knowledge of the mystery of the church, a dose of humility and attention to the contextuality of communion ecclesiology will assist in listening to and speaking about the church.⁴⁰

40 This paper was first given at the Fifth Annual Ecclesiological Investigations Conference at the University of Dayton in May 2011. I am grateful to the organizers of that conference, to the participants who first responded to these thoughts, and to the *Horizons* reviewers whose critiques improved the final product.