

# The Potential of Ecclesial Metaphors in Systematic Ecclesiology

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*In recent decades, the use of metaphor in ecclesiology has been broadly critiqued on the ground that metaphors are too abstract and idealized to advance our understanding of the concrete church in history; consequently, ecclesiology has embraced an “empirical turn,” incorporating fields like ethnography and social sciences. In this article, the author argues for a positive function of metaphor in ecclesiology drawing from the work of Janet Martin Soskice. Metaphors link various associative networks of meaning and in doing so open up new imaginative horizons. This theory allows ecclesial metaphors to be examined for their adequacy in light of other empirical or nontheological fields of knowledge. In turn, this invites the theologian to explore other associative networks of meaning such that a metaphor leads to new insights into the nature and mission of the church. The metaphor of the church as the body of Christ serves as a test case.*

**Keywords:** metaphor, ecclesiology, Catholic Church, body of Christ, Pope Francis, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, method

## Introduction

**S**HORTLY after his election to the papacy in 2013, Pope Francis gave an interview with Antonio Spadaro, SJ, in which he famously spoke of the church as a “field hospital.” Spadaro asked him what the church needs today and what Francis’ hopes for the church are. The new pope replied:

I see clearly that the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds.... And you have to start from the ground up.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, “A Big Heart Open to God,” interview by Antonio Spadaro, SJ, *National Catholic Reporter*, September 30, 2013, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis>.

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Later that year, in his first Chrism Mass as pope, Francis spoke vividly about priests as shepherds. He exhorted his priests to “be shepherds, with the ‘odour of the sheep,’ make it real, as shepherds among your flock, fishers of men.”<sup>2</sup> In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the pope repeated this metaphor, this time applying it to the whole evangelizing community who must take on “the smell of the sheep” by involving themselves in peoples’ daily lives.<sup>3</sup> This metaphor has been used to sum up Francis’ theology of priestly ministry and to capture his vision of the kind of priests needed in the church today.<sup>4</sup> “Sheep” even has its own entry in *A Pope Francis Lexicon!*<sup>5</sup>

The image of the field hospital was widely picked up by Catholic media and has resonated among theologians, ecclesial ministers, and journalists ever since. Cardinal Blase Cupich praised the “stunning image” in the pages of *America Magazine*: “The ‘field hospital church’ is the antithesis of the ‘self-referential church.’ It is a term that triggers the imagination, forcing us to rethink our identity, mission and our life together as disciples of Jesus Christ.”<sup>6</sup> As William Cavanaugh points out, the image of the field hospital uniquely underscores the missionary nature of the church, for the church is

not just a hospital but a *field* hospital. Unlike a stationary institution that occupies a certain territory and defends it against encroachment, a field hospital is mobile, an event more than an institution. A field hospital is unconcerned about defending its own prerogatives, and instead goes outside of itself to respond to an emergency.<sup>7</sup>

The *National Catholic Reporter* uses the image of the field hospital as the title for its series on parish life in the United States.<sup>8</sup> African theologians and clergy

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, Chrism Mass Homily, March 28, 2013, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130328\\_messa-crismale.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130328_messa-crismale.html).

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24, 2013, §4, [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html).

<sup>4</sup> For example, as the title of the collection of Francis’ addresses in *With the Smell of the Sheep: The Pope Speaks to Priests, Bishops, and Other Shepherds*, ed. Giuseppe Merola (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Archbishop Justin Welby, “Sheep,” in *A Pope Francis Lexicon*, ed. Joshua J. McElwee and Cindy Wooden (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), 178–80.

<sup>6</sup> Blase J. Cupich, “Cardinal Cupich: Pope Francis’ ‘Field Hospital’ Calls Us to Radically Rethink Church Life,” January 8, 2018, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/12/29/cardinal-cupich-pope-francis-field-hospital-calls-us-radically-rethink-church-life>. A slightly expanded version of that essay is published as “Field Hospital” in *A Pope Francis Lexicon*, 72–74.

<sup>7</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Field Hospital: The Church’s Engagement with a Wounded World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2016), 3.

<sup>8</sup> *National Catholic Reporter* feature series, “The Field Hospital,” <https://www.ncronline.org/feature-series/the-field-hospital/stories>.

have embraced the image for its focus on pastoral care amid concrete situations of suffering and as a guide to renewing pastoral practice, education, and liturgy.<sup>9</sup> Theologians in the United States see in the image Francis' commitment to a missionary church and have used his metaphor to ground and inspire their own ecclesiological reflection.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, metaphor is serving a fruitful purpose in Pope Francis' papacy. His vibrant metaphors spur the theological imagination to focus on the church's ministry as one of healing rather than condemnation. With the images of the field hospital and odorous shepherds, Francis urges the church to "go to the peripheries"—another of his favored metaphorical phrases—and for his priests to live in the midst of the people of the world and as one of them rather than as distant, ontologically superior persons. The image of the field hospital may resonate even more now, as amid the COVID-19 outbreak in the spring of 2020 field hospitals were quickly constructed in cities across the United States, including one field hospital in New York City's Central Park.<sup>11</sup> Those of us in the United States who have never lived or worked in a war zone or humanitarian crisis have now witnessed the value and function of a field hospital, ready to offer critical care within neighborhoods that need it the most.

In recent decades, though, the use of metaphor in ecclesiology has been broadly critiqued on methodological grounds. Metaphors are seen as too abstract and idealized to advance our understanding of the concrete church in history, and they lack the clear and stable definitions necessary for systematic ecclesiology. At best, they may offer some nice flourish in preaching or

<sup>9</sup> Christopher White, "Experts Say Pope's Metaphor of a 'Field Hospital' Has Special Punch for Africa," December 8, 2019, <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-africa/2019/12/experts-say-popes-metaphor-of-a-field-hospital-has-special-punch-for-africa/>.

<sup>10</sup> As seen above, William Cavanaugh uses the metaphor as the title for his most recent book. As other examples, Richard Gaillardetz sees the image of the field hospital as an example of Francis' commitment to a missionary church, in *An Unfinished Council: Vatican II, Pope Francis, and the Renewal of Catholicism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 118. Annie Selak values the field hospital image for reframing the church's holiness through being involved in the world rather than being set apart from it, while also arguing that the church must attend to and heal its own wounds, specifically racism and sexism, in "Toward an Ecclesial Vision in the Shadow of Wounds" (PhD diss., Boston College, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> The Central Park field hospital was run by the nonprofit Samaritan's Purse in coordination with Mount Sinai Hospital and treated more than three hundred patients. The Javits Convention Center in midtown Manhattan was also turned into a field hospital and treated more than one thousand patients. See Sheri Fink, "Treating Coronavirus in a Central Park 'Hot Zone,'" *New York Times*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/nyregion/coronavirus-central-park-hospital-tent.html>.

liturgical language, but at worst, they are prone to ideological usage and serve as “rallying cries for conflicting factions” in the church.<sup>12</sup> The extended use of metaphor in ecclesiology has become, in short, rather suspect.

Yet as we have seen in Pope Francis, ecclesial metaphors have not died out, and in fact they continue to contribute to ecclesiological reflection and renewal. Indeed, metaphors have been used to express the nature and mystery of the church since its beginnings, with more than two hundred images of the church found in the New Testament.<sup>13</sup> What is needed, therefore, is an account of the positive, and even necessary, function of metaphor in ecclesiology. This article will offer one such account drawn from the work of Janet Martin Soskice.<sup>14</sup> I begin by reviewing in greater depth the most common arguments against the use of metaphors in systematic ecclesiology—that they are abstract and idealized, they express conflicting values and therefore can be used ideologically, and they lack clear and stable meaning. I then turn to Soskice’s “interanimation theory” of metaphor to provide, first of all, a more adequate explanatory account of the role of metaphor in ecclesiology. Second, Soskice’s work provides a theoretical framework by which we can integrate nontheological data into our interpretation of metaphors and so evaluate and reimagine ecclesial metaphors beyond their traditional, and at times ideological, use. This allows ecclesial metaphors to reflect and make use of the broader turn toward utilizing social and empirical disciplines in ecclesiology. The final section of this article demonstrates this second aspect of Soskice’s theory using the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ as a test case. My purpose is not to deny the limits of metaphor, but to balance those critiques by articulating what metaphors *can* and *do* contribute to ecclesiology.<sup>15</sup>

A clarification of three closely related terms is necessary at the outset. An image is a single term, one that is often easily visualized. A metaphor is a linguistic phenomenon; in Soskice’s definition, it is a figure of speech in which we speak about one subject in terms that are suggestive of another. A model is

<sup>12</sup> Brian P. Flanagan, “The Limits of Ecclesial Metaphors in Systematic Ecclesiology,” *Horizons* 35, no. 1 (2008): 52.

<sup>13</sup> Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960).

<sup>14</sup> Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>15</sup> My focus in this article is on the use of metaphor in ecclesiology in particular. For an argument in defense of the role of metaphor in theology in general (which also uses Soskice), see Ligita Rylškytė, SJE, “Metaphor and Analogy in Theology: A Choice between Lions and Witches, and Wardrobes?,” *Theological Studies* 78, no. 3 (2017): 696–717.

extralinguistic and is a systematic *application* of an image or metaphor for explanatory or exploratory purposes. For example, the statement “the church is the body of Christ” is a metaphor; the term “body” is an image therein. This metaphor can be (though need not be) used as a model to explore and explain, for example, the relationship between the “head” of the church and other “members.” Any biblical or extrabiblical image of the church—flock, people of God, temple of the Holy Spirit, field hospital, and so on—can be employed as a model, used metaphorically in any given grammatical statement, or both.

### **Images, Models, and Metaphors in Ecclesiology: Recent Critiques**

Avery Dulles, in his 1974 study *Models of the Church*, outlined five models of the church and their strengths and weaknesses for ecclesiology. Distinguishing a model from an image, he states that “when an image is employed reflectively and critically to deepen one’s theoretical understanding of a reality it becomes what is today called a ‘model.’”<sup>16</sup> A metaphor, like an image, can be employed as a model as well. For Dulles, models have both explanatory and exploratory uses. In their explanatory function, models “serve to synthesize what we already know or at least are inclined to believe”; they account for biblical, traditional, historical, and experiential data. In their exploratory or heuristic use, through the ongoing work and experience of grace, they can “lead to new theological insights” that have not been made conscious in the past.<sup>17</sup> As a work in comparative ecclesiology, *Models of the Church* demonstrated how different ecclesial models express different, and sometimes opposed, theological commitments and ecclesiological values. To resolve this tension, Dulles maintained that one must “harmonize the models in such a way that their differences become complementary rather than mutually repugnant.”<sup>18</sup> Dulles initially proposed that the model of the church as sacrament best integrates and preserves the strengths of other models; in the 1987 edition of *Models of the Church*, he suggested instead that the “community of disciples” model had the most promise as “a basis for a comprehensive ecclesiology.”<sup>19</sup>

Although Dulles’ work was an important step forward in ecclesiological method in its day, theologians in recent decades have shifted away from, and at times argued against, the use of models and metaphors (especially a

<sup>16</sup> Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, expanded ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 15.

<sup>17</sup> Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 17, 18.

<sup>18</sup> Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 187.

<sup>19</sup> Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 198.

single metaphor) as starting points for ecclesiology, for several reasons. The most common critique is that metaphors tend toward an idealized, abstract image of the church, one that is removed from history and the concrete reality of the communities of the faithful. This is the core of Nicholas Healy's evaluation of "blueprint ecclesiologies."<sup>20</sup> By this phrase he means ecclesiologies that use a single metaphor or image to envision the ideal church to which we all would like to belong, and then apply this "blueprint" to subsequent questions or problems in ecclesiology. The problem, in Healy's judgment, is that a blueprint ecclesiology conceives of the church abstractly. It begins with the imagined ideal rather than studying and evaluating the church's concrete historical reality, its practices, and its institutional structures. As such, it does little to "aid the concrete church in performing its tasks of witness and pastoral care within ... its 'ecclesiological context'" (which, for Healy, is the purpose of ecclesiology).<sup>21</sup> Similarly, a blueprint ecclesiology lacks an appropriately eschatological sense of the church's perfection. It "does not make a sufficient distinction between the church militant and the church triumphant," between the pilgrim church concretized in history and the heavenly church in its fullness.<sup>22</sup> Thus, a models approach or blueprint ecclesiology can fail to take seriously or account for the ongoing presence of sin and imperfection in the church in history.<sup>23</sup> Neil Ormerod agrees with Healy's judgment here and also critiques ecclesial metaphors as being idealized to the point of obscuring the historical, empirical

<sup>20</sup> Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 38.

<sup>22</sup> Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 37.

<sup>23</sup> These critiques fail to observe that not all metaphors or models are necessarily idealized accounts of the church that cannot account for sin. Take, for example, the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ. Although at first glance this may suggest an idealized account of the church's perfect unity or identity with Christ, patristic authors often used the metaphor of the body to describe the effect of sin on the church. Augustine, for example, describes the church as "a person who limps, who sets one foot firmly in place but drags the other." For Chrysostom, the body is "full of sores." Others describe sinners as bodily members who are "sickly and weak," "injured and ailing," "decaying," "tainted," "diseased," "deformed and shameful," and "must be cut out." See Sebastian Tromp, *Corpus Christ, Quod Est Ecclesia*, trans. Ann Condit (New York: Vantage Press, 1960), 148–49. This is also the case with the supposed idealized metaphor of the church as the bride of Christ. Within this metaphor, the sinful church is spoken of as an unfaithful spouse, a harlot, or a whore. It is a mistake to assume that an ecclesial metaphor refers only to the church's eschatological, atemporal, or spiritual reality, and not its concrete historical reality.

church and ignoring “the discrepancy between the idealized form and the historical facts.”<sup>24</sup>

The second major argument against the use of a single or central metaphor in ecclesiology is that different ecclesial metaphors suggest different ideals of the church and convey different values; as such, they risk ideological usage. Each metaphor has its own strengths and weaknesses, highlighting certain problems and clarifying certain aspects of the mystery of the church, while obscuring or hiding others. As Dulles himself acknowledges, the values associated with different metaphors can conflict with and contradict one another, and the evaluation of ecclesial models is too easily reducible to one’s own values and personal taste. “Pursued alone, any single model will lead to distortions.”<sup>25</sup> Brian Flanagan, in particular, warns against the tendency for metaphors to be used ideologically. He has found that “people of God” and “bride of Christ” have been “rallying cries for conflicting factions” in the church, conveying values of equality, common dignity, and participation on the one hand, and hierarchical authority and obedience to Christ on the other.<sup>26</sup> Healy suggests similarly when he points out that there is no consensus as to which model is foundational and that models lack the power of conviction; any given theologian will choose an ecclesial model or metaphor on the basis of their own prior theological commitments. If theologians disagree on which model is best for thinking through a particular ecclesiological problem, they will likely disagree on the practical outcomes derived from that model as well.<sup>27</sup> Herwi Rikhof’s work in theories of metaphor supports this concern from a theoretical perspective: because metaphors are ambiguous and do not have clear criteria of normativity and authenticity, “an exclusive narrative or metaphorical theology is not able to counter the charge that it is a form of ideology.”<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, these authors point out that a metaphor does not have inherent ecclesiological meaning, but is ascribed meaning and consequence based on any given theologian’s broader theological agenda. Susan Ross has shown how this is true with regard to the metaphor of the church as bride, which has been used to

<sup>24</sup> Neil Ormerod, “The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology,” *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 3–30, at 5. Chapter one of his *Re-Visioning the Church: An Experiment in Systematic-Historical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014) is a slightly revised and expanded version of the article cited here.

<sup>25</sup> Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 20 and 181–84.

<sup>26</sup> Flanagan, “The Limits of Ecclesial Metaphors in Systematic Ecclesiology,” 52; see also 33.

<sup>27</sup> Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 36. Recall from my definition of terms above that a model is simply an application of a metaphor, which is a grammatical form.

<sup>28</sup> Herwi Rikhof, *The Concept of Church: A Methodological Inquiry into the Use of Metaphors in Ecclesiology* (Shepherdstown, WV: Patmos Press, 1981), 148.

justify and explain the church's opposition to the ordination of women and to same-sex marriage.<sup>29</sup>

Third, metaphors are seen to be insufficiently systematic. Because they do not, in themselves, offer resources for adjudicating the tensions that come into play when implicated in ideological discourses, nor do they elucidate their connection to other theological and scientific fields of study or contain explanatory power, they cannot yield a "comprehensive ecclesiology" as Dulles suggests. Flanagan finds that "ecclesial metaphors provide suggestions, starting points, broad pictures of the values embodied in ecclesial relationships, but cannot on their own explain the relationships between these metaphors or relate them to other theological and social scientific theories."<sup>30</sup> Because of this inherent imprecision, "narrative or metaphorical theology necessarily has to be supplemented by argument" and systematic explanation, and therefore cannot stand on its own in a systematic ecclesiology.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, of the two methods identified by Flanagan for dealing with the plurality of metaphors—juxtaposing them, or choosing a dominant metaphor—neither has proven to be an adequate methodology.<sup>32</sup> Because there is no consensus as to which metaphor or model is or ought to be foundational, and preference for one model over another varies over time, there can be no singularly "right" model, or "supermodel." Thus, no complete systematic ecclesiology can be deduced from any single model.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, metaphors are also criticized as "prescientific" and as belonging to religious language or first-order discourse rather than to theological or second-order discourse.<sup>34</sup> Flanagan, Healy, Ormerod, and Rikhof acknowledge that metaphors can be useful and even necessary in preaching and

<sup>29</sup> Susan Ross, "The Bride of Christ and the Body Politic: Body and Gender in Pre-Vatican II Marriage Theology," *Journal of Religion* 71, no. 3 (1991): 345–61; Susan Ross, "The Bridegroom and the Bride: The Theological Anthropology of John Paul II and Its Relation to the Bible and Homosexuality," in *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Toward the Development of Moral Theology*, ed. Patricia Beattie Jung and Joseph Andrew Coray (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 39–59; Susan Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> Flanagan, "The Limits of Ecclesial Metaphors in Systematic Ecclesiology," 48. See also Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church*, 17, for his agreement on this point.

<sup>31</sup> Rikhof, *The Concept of Church*, 141.

<sup>32</sup> Flanagan, "The Limits of Ecclesial Metaphors in Systematic Ecclesiology," 43–47.

<sup>33</sup> Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 31–35.

<sup>34</sup> Joseph A. Komonchak, "History and Social Theory in Ecclesiology," *Foundations in Ecclesiology*, ed. Fred Lawrence, suppl. issue, Lonergan Workshop, no. 11 (1995): 3–46, at 12. Decades earlier, Mannes Koster also judged "mystical body" language for the church to be "pre-theological"; Mannes Koster, *Ekklesiologie Im Werden* (Paderborn: Bonifacius-Druckerei, 1940).



the functional specialty of communications, and they find value for metaphors in the liturgical and spiritual life of the Christian community. But the tasks of systematic ecclesiology are not the same as the tasks of preaching and prayer, for systematic ecclesiology, according to Flanagan, “requires defined categories and concepts, foundational positions, and relatively stable definitions of terms and of the relations between those terms.”<sup>35</sup> In Ormerod’s view, a systematic ecclesiology must be empirical/historical, critical, normative, dialectical, and practical, and metaphors alone do not meet these criteria. Although metaphors contribute “open-endedness,... conceptual and experiential richness, and ... symbolic depth” to theology, they resist the stable definitions and consistent terminology that are necessary for a systematic understanding of the church.<sup>36</sup>

For all of these reasons, such theologians urge systematic ecclesiology to “move beyond” metaphor<sup>37</sup> in order to describe the church in more precise theoretical or analytical language, whether to avoid ideology, answer particular questions about ecclesial life, or adjudicate between competing values communicated by various metaphors.<sup>38</sup> In response to the perceived problem that metaphors are too abstract and ignore the historical reality of the church, many ecclesialists have argued for greater use of ethnography, social theory, or other empirical studies in order to better understand the concrete historical church. Healy, for example, argues for an “ecclesiological ethnography.” In order to help the church perform its tasks of witness and pastoral care, the theologian must engage in a critical analysis of “ecclesiological context” using both theological and nontheological tools (such as sociology and ethnography) in order to offer a practical-prophetic ecclesiology that responds to this context and is not simply an abstract or overly theoretical doctrine of the church.<sup>39</sup> We also see this turn to ethnography and empirical studies in Roger Haight and James Nieman’s development of an ecclesiological model that incorporates congregational studies<sup>40</sup> and Paul Murray’s

<sup>35</sup> Flanagan, “The Limits of Ecclesial Metaphors in Systematic Ecclesiology,” 49.

<sup>36</sup> Flanagan, “The Limits of Ecclesial Metaphors in Systematic Ecclesiology,” 49.

<sup>37</sup> Flanagan, “The Limits of Ecclesial Metaphors in Systematic Ecclesiology,” 33 and 53.

<sup>38</sup> To be sure, this is not a universally held position among theologians or ecclesialists. See Richard Lennan, “The Church as a Sacrament of Hope,” *Theological Studies* 71 (2011): 247–74. Lennan, for one, views the diversity of metaphors in Scripture, tradition, and theology as a benefit to ecclesiology—the plurality and imprecision of metaphors are precisely their strengths, pointing to the excess and mystery of God and thus the church in relation to God.

<sup>39</sup> Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 24.

<sup>40</sup> Roger Haight and James Nieman, “On the Dynamic Relation Between Ecclesiology and Congregational Studies,” *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 577–99.

search for a “transformative systematic ecclesiology” that can analyze and account for concrete ecclesial and sociological realities, such as the sexual abuse crisis, in a truly integrative way with systematic theological reflection.<sup>41</sup> Joseph Komonchak and Ormerod, drawing in various ways on their Lonerganian foundations, have each sketched a methodology for ecclesiology to engage social sciences and the data of history as it seeks to understand the church in the concrete.<sup>42</sup> More recently, Paul Avis has advocated the use of ethnography in ecclesiology while refuting some mischaracterizations of the methodology of either field.<sup>43</sup> Putting method into practice, Mary McClintock Fulkerson’s ethnographic study of a multiracial Methodist church is one example, among many others, of this kind of ethnographic ecclesiology.<sup>44</sup>

But with regard to the other perceived limitations of ecclesial metaphors—their potentially ideological use, their lack of inherent or stable meaning, and their inappropriateness to second-order theological discourse—the critics of ecclesial metaphors offer no better alternatives other than simply to disavow metaphor as a foundation for ecclesiology and forgo the search for a supermodel or central metaphor. And yet many of them *do* continue to invoke metaphors in their own work in ways that go unacknowledged and untheorized. For example, drawing from the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Healy uses the extended metaphor of the drama or play to describe salvation history and to model the divine-human relationship in which any ecclesiology takes root. This is not an idealized or blueprint ecclesiology of which Healy is so critical, but it *is* a metaphor, which is applied systematically as a model (what Healy calls a theodramatic horizon, as distinguished from

<sup>41</sup> Paul Murray, “Searching the Living Truth of the Church in Practice: On the Transformative Task of Systematic Ecclesiology,” *Modern Theology* 30 (2014): 252–81.

<sup>42</sup> See the works by Komonchak and Ormerod cited previously. Brian P. Flanagan, “Communion, Diversity and Salvation: The Contribution of Jean-Marie Tillard, O.P., to Systematic Ecclesiology” (PhD diss., Boston College, 2007), 34–41, provides a helpful review of the methodologies of Komonchak, Healy, and Ormerod.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Avis, “Ecclesiology and Ethnography: An Unresolved Relationship,” *Ecclesiology* 14 (2018): 322–37.

<sup>44</sup> Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). For other examples, see the essays in Christian Scharen, ed., *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), and Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2011). This is likely to be a growing trend; the Catholic Theological Society of America is hosting a three-year interest group “Fieldwork in Theology” running 2021–2023, indicating a critical mass of interest in this subject.

inclusivist, exclusivist, and pluralist horizons) in order to understand the reality under investigation.

Similarly, Ormerod admits a role for models in ecclesiology, even in systematic ecclesiology as he defines it, for theological reflection upon the church

does not seek simply to understand Church as it is empirically constituted ... but also attempts to be normative, spelling out not just how Church actually is but how it should be, at least in the theologian's understanding. The norms may draw on what is best in the actual praxis of Church in a given era as well as elements of the tradition. These ecclesiologies will feed back into the actual praxis of Church by presenting *a theoretical model* to be followed, imitated, and praised.<sup>45</sup>

Ormerod identifies the “biblical symbol” of the kingdom of God as the teleological orientation of the church and the norm against which the history of the church can be made intelligible.<sup>46</sup> This teleological element “gives ecclesiology theological depth, ensuring that it is not reduced to being simply a critical history of the Church. It adds something new, for the introduction of an explicit teleology based on the kingdom of God provides us the norms for evaluating the life of the Church.”<sup>47</sup> Of course, these norms may not always be fully or adequately realized in history, and so “a truly systematic ecclesiology will seek to understand the ways in which such systematic breakdowns occur”; “it will diagnose a sickness, and supply the prescription for the needed medicine.”<sup>48</sup>

Flanagan and Rikhof use metaphors as well. Rikhof, after reviewing the decades of disagreement about the central metaphor of *Lumen Gentium*, and despairing the lack of clarity regarding a “metaphor” versus a “concept,” asserts that *communio* is the one fundamental concept and “basic statement” for ecclesiology (though without explaining why *communio* is a concept rather than a metaphor, or resolving the debates following Vatican II regarding whether “body of Christ” and “people of God” are metaphors, images, concepts, or something else). In Flanagan’s latest book, he uses the extended metaphor of the church as pilgrim—one who walks or journeys purposefully toward a meaningful destination—to describe the church, in its sinfulness, as “stumbling,” as well as other Catholic Christians as “fellow pilgrims” who together “walk along the road with our

<sup>45</sup> Ormerod, “The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology,” 7, emphasis mine.

<sup>46</sup> Ormerod “The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology,” 8-14.

<sup>47</sup> Ormerod “The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology,” 9.

<sup>48</sup> Ormerod “The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology,” 10. Note the use of metaphor (that of illness) here.

God.”<sup>49</sup> Flanagan’s work demonstrates that the use of a central metaphor for envisioning the church 1) does not necessarily reify an *idealized* notion of the church (the metaphor of pilgrim ably captures the realities of failure and sin, as well as holiness), 2) is not necessarily at odds with an analysis of the church’s concrete historical reality, which Flanagan so aptly analyzes, and 3) is not necessarily at odds with the coordinate task of “attending to our concepts, their definitions, and their relationships” in systematic theology (at which point Flanagan utilizes the “definition” of the church as the *congregatio fidelium*).<sup>50</sup>

For all their caveats against models and metaphors, then, such forms of speech and thought appear to be inescapable—useful, and perhaps even necessary. In fact, Healy admits:

We are likely to find that there are certain things that must be said about the church that are best said by means of a certain image or concept, so that some models may be necessary ones. But if different perspectives on the church are necessary as well as permissible, then not only are claims for a supermodel unwarrantable, the very search for them unwarrantably contracts our ecclesiological horizons. Models should instead be used to discover and explore imaginatively the many facets of the Christian Church.<sup>51</sup>

What’s more, though they typically do not assert a single metaphor as *the* supermodel or foundation for all ecclesiology (Rikhof is the exception here), they do operate with *their* preferred metaphor, symbol, or concept—theodrama, kingdom of God, pilgrim, or *communio*—as the center of their own ecclesiological imagination and investigation. This suggests, in other words, that they also have not found a way out of the problem they identify that each theologian will utilize whichever image, model, or metaphor suits their broader theological agenda. Even Ormerod’s turn to the “symbol” of the kingdom of God as a telos for ecclesiology or the history of the church does not avoid the critique that metaphors are prone to bias or have no internal mechanism for adjudicating between them, for one could just as well select “bride of Christ” or “body of Christ” as the “explicit teleology” or

<sup>49</sup> Brian P. Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness: Sin and Sanctity in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), 6, 7, and *passim*.

<sup>50</sup> Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness*, 42. See 72–81 for his basic definition of the church as the assembly of the faithful as part of his systematic effort to understand the church as both holy and sinful.

<sup>51</sup> Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 36. In this regard, Healy is not far from Dulles’ own position that ecclesial models can provide an exploratory function within ecclesiology.

norm against which the life of the church is measured. And even the turn to the concrete historical church and the analysis of the concrete church's successes and failures relies on a normative vision for the church, one that is often expressed in metaphors of a "pilgrim people," "communion," or the "kingdom of God."

In short, those who have most thoroughly articulated the shortcomings of metaphors in ecclesiology cannot avoid using ecclesial metaphors in their own work—yet they lack a full account of *how* and *why* metaphors continue to play a useful role in ecclesiology. I share the aforementioned concerns regarding the risks of ideological uses of ecclesial metaphors and the need for a rigorous method that can analyze and account for concrete ecclesial realities in a truly integrative way with systematic theological reflection. For precisely this reason, we need a theory of metaphor that can resist ideological usage and that is open to other, nontheological sources of knowledge about the human and social condition. I also agree that, given the very nature of divine mystery and the ongoing dynamism of human history, it is neither possible nor desirable to settle on a single correct supermodel that would define the church for all times and places. However, the professed turn away from metaphor and toward the empirical, ethnographic, and historical does not actually resolve two of the main concerns with metaphor—their risk of functioning ideologically and the lack of stable meaning and evaluative criteria. Moreover, the arguments summarized previously undervalue the unique role that ecclesial metaphors clearly continue to play in theological speech, not simply in religious speech or in the context of prayer and preaching. More can and must be said about the positive function of metaphors in ecclesiology. What is needed is a theory of metaphor that 1) explains how a metaphor generates new theological insight, relevant to second-order discourse and the task of understanding the church, 2) enables interaction between an ecclesial metaphor and other fields of knowledge, and therefore 3) offers the possibility of evaluating the adequacy of various metaphors and multiplying their interpretations in order to resist their ideological usage.

### **The Positive Function of Metaphor in Ecclesiology**

The arguments reviewed above suggest that metaphors may serve a valuable role in religious speech and the task of preaching, but systematic ecclesiology must "go beyond" metaphor to more precise definitions of the nature and structure of the church and a more practical analysis of its concrete manifestation in history. These arguments, however, reveal inadequate theories of metaphor that underestimate their cognitive power. In *Metaphor*

*and Religious Language*, Janet Martin Soskice identifies two theories of metaphor that ultimately fail to provide an adequate account of how metaphors function—an ornamentalist or substitutionist theory, and an emotive theory. The substitutionist theory sees metaphor as a decorative substitution for a literal term, as “clothing tired literal expression in attractive new garb, of alleviating boredom, and, as Aquinas says, of being accessible to the uneducated.”<sup>52</sup> In this view, a metaphor simply substitutes an improper word for a proper one as rhetorical flourish; it adds no new meaning and “could equally well be expressed in non-metaphorical terms.”<sup>53</sup> In fact, metaphor may muddy our thoughts rather than lead to new insights and perhaps *should* be replaced by more literal or conceptual language, according to this substitutionist account. An emotive theory of metaphor supposes that metaphors simply achieve a certain affective impact; they do so through “deviant word usage,” combining terms in such a way that, because the expression is not literally meaningful, a greater emotive meaning is evoked.<sup>54</sup> In this theory, a metaphor does not add any new meaning that a literal statement would not—it simply has a greater affective impact on the hearer. The claim that metaphor is suited to preaching or spirituality but not to systematic theology reveals this assumption that metaphor only achieves affective impact rather than revealing new cognitive insight. Similarly, the notion that systematic ecclesiology ought to set metaphor aside in order to achieve conceptual clarity and intellectual rigor indicates an operative substitutionist theory—as if metaphorical language could be substituted, indeed surpassed, by literal speech.

Soskice argues that substitutionist and emotive theories of metaphor fail in three ways to provide an adequate account of how metaphors function linguistically and cognitively. First, they fail to see that metaphors *add* meaning and understanding—otherwise, authors would simply use words literally. In a good metaphor, a particular meaning is accessible *only through* that metaphor.<sup>55</sup> Second, these theories fail to recognize that metaphor does not simply substitute one term for another (and indeed may not even include two terms or subjects within the metaphorical utterance) but “enables one to see similarities in what had previously been regarded as dissimilars.”<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 24.

<sup>53</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 31.

<sup>54</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 26, citing Monroe Beardsley’s summary of the emotive theory, in *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1958), 134–35.

<sup>55</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 48.

<sup>56</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 26. Any theological metaphor—that is, any attempt to speak about the divine in human terms—is a speech act that suggests

Third, they forget that emotive meaning is reliant upon the perception of cognitive meaning. Soskice's own "interanimation theory" of metaphor provides a more adequate basis for understanding the unique role that metaphor plays in theological speech and therefore in ecclesiology.

In Soskice's definition, a metaphor is "that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another."<sup>57</sup> She argues that metaphors are cognitively unique, not merely ornamentalist or emotive, and disclose new information about their subject that cannot be expressed in any other way. A metaphor accomplishes this by uniting its subject with the associative networks of meaning of another term, object, or concept. Three aspects of Soskice's theory of metaphor are especially pertinent to the study of metaphor in ecclesiology.

First, Soskice emphasizes that a metaphor is a figure of speech. It is a form of language use, a linguistic event—not a physical object or a mental event. It is an utterance. A word or phrase in itself is not a metaphor, but can be *used* metaphorically. Consequently, words do not have metaphorical meanings in isolation. The meaning of a metaphorical use of a term can only be discerned within the context of the complete utterance.<sup>58</sup> For example, the term "body" is not itself a metaphor for the church. Rather, the metaphor is the utterance "the church is a body" or "the church is the body of Christ." By understanding metaphor as a form of speech, Soskice emphasizes that to identify an utterance as a metaphor is *not yet* to offer a theological or metaphysical evaluation of the metaphor. To illustrate the importance of this distinction, Soskice offers the example of Jesus' claim that "this bread is my body":

Is this metaphorical or not? The question is frequently asked as though one's answer will settle an enormous theological controversy ... as though, could we but acknowledge that phrases such as this one were metaphorical, we would be freed from the metaphysical difficulties which have troubled centuries of theological debate. But to think in this way is to fall back into the ornamentalist theories of metaphor against which we have been arguing ... The point at issue is not really whether we have metaphor

similarities across the ultimate dissimilars. It is precisely the presupposition of difference that makes a metaphor, an assertion of similarities, cognitively and affectively evocative.

<sup>57</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 15. For the sake of brevity, she uses "metaphor" when it should be clearly understood that she means "metaphorical utterances." I will do the same.

<sup>58</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, chap. 1. Her position here is distinct from that of Paul Ricoeur and Herwi Rikhof, who hold that a metaphor occurs at the level of a sentence, not a single word or phrase; Soskice adds that a metaphor may extend beyond a single sentence to include several sentences or an entire idea (such as in a poem).

here, but what the metaphor is doing. Is it simply an ornamental redescription, so that Jesus has redescribed bread in an evocative way? Or is the metaphor genuinely catachretical, not a redescription but a naming or disclosing for the first time? It is one's metaphysics, not metaphor, which is at issue. To put it another way, the question is not simply whether we have a metaphor here or not, but what, if anything, the metaphor refers to or signifies.<sup>59</sup>

Likewise, to say that the church is a body or that it is the body of Christ is to speak in metaphor. It is to speak about one thing—the church—in terms suggestive of another—an enfleshed, living organism. But we must still ask “what the metaphor is doing,” or what it signifies. It is the theologian's task to interpret and evaluate the ecclesiological and Christological claims being communicated by the metaphor. Those who dismiss ecclesial images as simply metaphors, as well as those who dismiss metaphors as second-rate descriptions of the church, fail to notice that to identify something as a metaphor is a grammatical judgment, not an ontological or theological judgment. To say that the statements “the church is the body of Christ” or “the church is a pilgrim” are metaphors is indeed an accurate assessment of the form of speech; the church is obviously not a body or a pilgrim in the literal use of those terms. But this fact alone does not pass judgment on or lead to any particular conclusions about the meaning and role of this metaphor in ecclesiology. The recognition of this point ought to ease the somewhat frantic debates about whether certain terms are metaphors, concepts, symbols, or definitions of the church.<sup>60</sup>

Soskice further clarifies that there is no “metaphorical truth” as opposed to “literal truth,” or “metaphorical meaning” as opposed to “literal meaning.” There is, however, metaphorical *usage* versus literal *usage*. Literal usage is accustomed usage that requires no imaginative strain for the native speaker; the literal sense(s) of a word may be found in a dictionary, whereas the metaphorical sense of a word is discernible only within the context of a particular utterance. Through the process of catachresis (the application of a term to a new context where a term is lacking), a metaphorical usage of a word can become “lexicalized” and take on a literal sense. In this way, metaphor has the “capacity to expand our lexicon, and in so doing, it

<sup>59</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 90.

<sup>60</sup> As Rikhof shows, the years following the promulgation of *Lumen Gentium* were marked by a flurry of debate over the linguistic status of “people of God” and “body of Christ.” These phrases have been called metaphor, image, concept, image-concept, more-than-an-image, analogy, graphic description, essence-description, and definition—as if a decision about linguistic status would determine theological and ontological status, in *The Concept of the Church*, chap. 1.



expands the conceptual apparatus with which we work.”<sup>61</sup> Likewise, there are not two meanings to a metaphor, a “literal” meaning that is false and a metaphorical meaning that is true. As Soskice straightforwardly says, a metaphor has “but one meaning; the alternative is nonsense. Either we understand [a] passage as a metaphor or we do not understand it.”<sup>62</sup> This is not to say that a metaphor can only evoke one network of associations. In fact, what makes the metaphor “the church is the body of Christ” so rich is that there are, as I will show, multiple networks of meaning associated with the term “body.” Soskice’s point here is simply that within the whole speech context, it is typically a misunderstanding of the speaker’s intent to construe a metaphorical utterance as a literal utterance. Metaphors must be understood within their context, and the truth or falsity of a metaphor can only be judged in connection with the reality to which the metaphor refers.

The second important aspect of Soskice’s account is that metaphor discloses unique cognitive content. To describe how this occurs, Soskice draws from I. A. Richards’ interactive theory of metaphor, especially his terms “tenor” and “vehicle,” which name the two “ideas” that are united in a metaphor.<sup>63</sup> The tenor is the underlying subject of the metaphor, and the vehicle is “the mode in which [the metaphor] is expressed.”<sup>64</sup> For example, in the metaphor “the church is a body,” the tenor is “the church,” and the vehicle is “body” and its associated meanings. Another example that illustrates Soskice’s theory is the statement that the sacrament of penance is “a saving medicine” that provides for the health of the body and removes all danger of contagion.<sup>65</sup> The tenor is the grace of the sacrament, and the vehicle is medicine. Soskice expands Richards’ theory by showing that metaphors rely on an underlying model or models that are shared by the speaker and the hearer of the metaphor. To be clear, she does *not* mean “model” in Dulles’ sense of a systematic heuristic tool. By “model” Soskice means the “associative network” of a term, the plurality of meanings, visualizations,

<sup>61</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 61–62. An example of catachresis is the “stem” of a wine glass, or “leg” of a table.

<sup>62</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 85.

<sup>63</sup> I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936). Soskice’s use of the term “ideas” here is significant, in that she rejects theories that suggest that metaphors have two “terms” or “subjects.” This is first of all because a metaphor has only one true subject, and second, it may not have two “terms” explicitly present within the linguistic utterance though it still unites two ideas.

<sup>64</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 39.

<sup>65</sup> Pope Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis Christi: On the Mystical Body of Christ*, June 29, 1943, [https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_29061943\\_mystici-corporis-christi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_29061943_mystici-corporis-christi.html), §18.

and descriptions that come to mind when a word is heard. She describes “the associative network of a term” as “its placement in a semantic field where the “value” of the term is fixed not simply by the terms for which it might be exchanged ... but also by the entities of which the term would customarily be predicated.”<sup>66</sup> She gives the example of the metaphor of a “writhing script”: “one might associate with ‘writhing’ not only action similar to writhing such as twisting and squirming, but also entities which are known to writhe, such as snakes or persons in pain.”<sup>67</sup> To continue with the example of penance, the “models” or “associative networks” underlying the vehicle “medicine” are the strengthening and healing functions that medicine performs within a human body.

In a metaphor, tenor and vehicle unite and “interanimate” one another, disclosing new meaning and interpretive possibilities. It speaks about a single subject matter by drawing upon one or more sets of associations.<sup>68</sup> It is by uniting tenor and vehicle and their associative networks “that a metaphor is genuinely creative and says something that can be said adequately in no other way, not as an ornament to what we already know but as an embodiment of a new insight.”<sup>69</sup> By speaking of penance as a medicine, our minds are taken beyond the form or practice of the sacrament to its healing effects and its necessary administration to a sick body. Furthermore, the metaphor invites our minds beyond the words at hand to consider God (through the mediation of the priest) as a compassionate doctor who desires our fullness of life or to consider ourselves as dependent upon God’s wisdom and care for our healing and flourishing. As Soskice says, “A good metaphor may not simply be an oblique reference to a predetermined subject but a new vision, the birth of a new understanding, a new referential access. A strong metaphor compels new possibilities of vision.”<sup>70</sup>

Third and finally, Soskice argues that a metaphor’s cognitive uniqueness is irreducible to “words proper” or strictly literal usages. The interanimation of tenor and vehicle takes us beyond the dictionary definitions of the terms within a metaphor to the world of meanings associated with those terms. This is not simply a combination or identification of two previously

<sup>66</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 50.

<sup>67</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 50.

<sup>68</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 49. This is where Soskice’s theory is most distinct from other theories that suggest that metaphor is a comparison of two things in the mind, or a transfer or substitution of meaning from one term to another.

<sup>69</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 48

<sup>70</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 57–58. In the example of penance, we can see how a model leads to further metaphorical speech. The underlying model of healing leads to the metaphorical description of God as a doctor.

understood terms. Rather, metaphor invites us to consider a relatively unknown (e.g., the grace of a sacrament) through a relatively known (e.g., medicine and its functions). Thus, in contrast to theories such as Rikhof's that suggest that metaphors redescribe a reality, Soskice shows that good metaphors "are used not to redescribe but to disclose for the first time."<sup>71</sup> Because metaphors are not simply ornamental descriptions of an already-understood reality, they cannot be translated into literal terms without loss of meaning and cognitive (and so also affective) content.

By explaining the way in which a metaphor generates new vision and insight, Soskice's interanimation theory shows the positive role that metaphor plays in ecclesiology. Metaphors are not simply decorative flourishes that could otherwise be replaced by literal, conceptual speech. They do not simply prod at our emotions through their creativity or shock value. Rather, they link various associative networks and in so doing open up new imaginative horizons. Metaphors communicate *from* and *to* the depths of the human imagination and therefore have a communicative and disclosive potential unique from that of conceptual, controlled speech. Pope Francis' metaphor of the church as a field hospital has done just this—by speaking of the church and its ministers as a nimble construction designed to rapidly respond to critical needs, Francis has sent theological reflection and pastoral practice in a new direction, focusing not on condemnation of or withdrawal from the world, but on diving into a messy, hurting world in order to heal wounds. Soskice's theory provides an explanatory account of how such an ecclesial metaphor can generate new energy and insight and, therefore, more adequately indicates the role that metaphor has played and can continue to play in systematic ecclesiology than what is admitted by Healy, Flanagan, Rikhof, or Ormerod. A mere critique of metaphor in systematic ecclesiology or a careful delineation of its limits cannot account for the way in which, for example, the metaphor of the field hospital has caught on among theologians, church authorities, pastoral ministers, and journalists.

It is true that metaphors are not self-explanatory. All metaphors require interpretation. But this is not a shortcoming of metaphors, as critics argue; rather, it is their strength. It is precisely *because* metaphors lack a single, static interpretation or rigorous control of meaning—for reasons that will be identified below—that they can continually open up new insights and possibilities for ecclesiology. It is the task of the theologian to undertake this interpretation—to explore the possible meanings of an ecclesial metaphor and to evaluate the "new possibilities of vision" it offers through dialogue with the ongoing human experience from which it is derived and in the

<sup>71</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 89.

context of which it makes meaning. In addition to providing a more adequate account of the linguistic and cognitive function of metaphor, Soskice's account also provides the theoretical foundation for this exploratory and evaluative work and so enables us to meet one of the critiques of metaphors outlined above—that they lack evaluative criteria and risk ideological usage.

### Evaluating the Associative Networks

Soskice's theory highlights the role that both context and other extra-theological fields of knowledge play in interpreting the meaning of a metaphor. Metaphors rely on underlying networks of associations, meanings, visualizations, and descriptions that are shared by both the speaker and the hearer. For example, the metaphor "man is a wolf" "relies on both speaker and hearer having a shared body of knowledge or assumption about the nature of men and the nature of wolves, for example that the latter are clanish, cruel and so on."<sup>72</sup> If one were to speak this metaphor to a person who has no familiarity with or basic knowledge of wolves, the metaphor would be meaningless; it would fail to offer new insight about the "tenor" of the metaphor ("man") to the hearer. As a person grows in knowledge and understanding of the world—perhaps encounters a wolf in the wild or studies the habits of wolves in an environmental science class—her associative networks expand and metaphors can open up new, different, or richer meanings for her.

Soskice's theory indicates, therefore, that metaphors do not have a single, enduring, or inherent meaning apart from the speaker, hearer, and their contexts. The meaning of a metaphor is shaped by the world of knowledge that already exists in the minds of the speaker and hearer prior to the metaphorical speech-act. This has been true of ecclesial metaphors throughout their history. Images of the church in the New Testament are drawn from the common and familiar world of the original speaker and audience—images of flocks and shepherds, land and seeds, buildings and cornerstones, vines and branches, households and mothers, bodies and brides. As societies and peoples advance in knowledge or shift worlds of meaning, metaphors may gain new meaning or lose their prior significance along the way. As Sandra Schneiders points out in her treatment of metaphor in theology, some metaphors remain living and evocative for long periods of time, while other metaphors eventually die due to banalization, losing their capacity to spark the imagination and generate new insight.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 41.

<sup>73</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1991), 29–33. I am suggesting that metaphors

To be clear, when Soskice says that the interpretation or meaning of a metaphor relies on shared knowledge or associative networks, she notes that “the efficacy of the metaphor *does not depend on the factual accuracy of these commonplaces* but simply on the fact that roughly the same set of associations are made by speaker and hearer.”<sup>74</sup> It is on this point that I will take us beyond Soskice in applying her theory to ecclesial metaphors. Though it may be true that the efficacy of the metaphor does not *depend on* the factual accuracy of underlying assumptions or shared knowledge, I propose that those associative networks can be examined, critiqued, and judged for their factual accuracy or adequacy in light of contemporary thought. This is where other tools and fields such as natural sciences, social theory, and philosophy can help the theologian evaluate the prior meanings of ecclesial metaphors and reinterpret them in light of new or different associative networks, thereby challenging past ideological usages. To illustrate this process, let us turn to the metaphor of the church as a body, or the body of Christ, as a test case.

This ecclesial metaphor has a storied history. Originating in the Pauline texts of the New Testament, the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ was commonly used by patristic authors, most notably by Augustine in a number of his sermons on the Eucharist.<sup>75</sup> By the eleventh century, theologians began referring to the church as the mystical body to distinguish it from the Eucharist, the true body.<sup>76</sup> In the early nineteenth century, Johann Adam Möhler’s *Unity in the Church* revitalized ecclesiology by conceiving of the church as an organic body enlivened by the Spirit. In the early twentieth century, dozens of books and articles were published on the topic of the church as the “mystical body of Christ.”<sup>77</sup> The mystical body movement culminated in Pope Pius XII’s 1943 encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*, which defined the image of the mystical body as the most “noble,” “sublime,” and divine” description of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, the

might also die through changes in associative networks of meaning. For example, the metaphorical statement “Jesus is the Lamb of God” may be less resonant for those unfamiliar with ancient Jewish ritual sacrifice and the significance of lambs therein; images of flocks and shepherds may hold less meaning for those living in sprawling urban contexts.

<sup>74</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 41, emphasis mine.

<sup>75</sup> Saint Augustine, Sermons 227, 267, 268, and 272, in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, 4th release, electronic edition, ed. John Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, OP (Charlottesville, VA: InteLex Corp), 2014.

<sup>76</sup> See Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, trans. Gemma Simmonds with Richard Price and Christopher Stephens (London: SCM Press, 2006).

<sup>77</sup> Joseph Bluett, “The Mystical Body of Christ: 1890–1940,” *Theological Studies* 3, no. 2 (1942): 261–89.

<sup>78</sup> Pope Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis* §13.

metaphor of the church as a (mystical) body was critiqued by theologians, exegetes, and ecumenists in the decades leading up to Vatican II, with the result that the conciliar texts situate “body of Christ” among a variety of other, more central metaphors or concepts such as “people of God,” “sacrament,” and “communion.”<sup>79</sup> But the history of the metaphor of the church as a body is not simply a tale of it being favored in one era and neglected in another. The metaphor itself has had multiple, and sometimes quite disparate, interpretations over the past two thousand years, precisely because the associative networks linked to the “vehicle” of the metaphor (the term “body”) have varied, often in close relation to the philosophical and social-ecclesial context in which the metaphor was used.

In Paul’s use of the metaphor in his major epistles (Romans and Corinthians), the meanings, visualizations, and descriptions associated with the body are those of diversity as well as unity. For Paul, likely influenced by Greco-Roman and especially Stoic thought, a body is a whole made up of many distinguished parts—an eye, a hand, a foot, an ear. Each part, member, or organ has a particular function—sight, hearing, smell—that belongs to it and no other. There are greater and weaker or inferior body parts, but Paul emphasizes that they are all necessary to the functioning and well-being of the whole.<sup>80</sup> The deutero-Pauline captivity epistles (Colossians and Ephesians) add a new dimension of meaning to the image of the body. In these texts, “body” signifies “trunk,” the organic mass connected to, yet subordinate to, the head. The body derives its identity from

<sup>79</sup> The rise and fall of the mystical body movement between the 1920s and 1960s has been widely documented. See Edward P. Hahnenberg, “The Mystical Body of Christ and Communion Ecclesiology: Historical Parallels,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005): 3–30; Timothy R. Gabrielli, *One in Christ: Virgil Michel, Louis-Marie Chauvet, and Mystical Body Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017). Susan Wood sees this as “continuity and development” rather than a decline, in “Continuity and Development in Roman Catholic Ecclesiology,” *Ecclesiology* 7 (2011): 147–72.

<sup>80</sup> Scholars are not in agreement over the influences on Paul’s use of the body metaphor. Some find that Paul is evoking Menenius Agrippa’s fable about the state as analogous to the human body, with each part contributing to the whole. Others argue that he is drawing from Stoic philosophy, which holds that the human body is a microcosm of the universe, which is itself a body, or Seneca’s use of the body metaphor to identify Nero as the soul, head, and mind of the state, which is his body. Still others argue that Paul is primarily influenced by Jewish notions of corporate personality, rabbinic notions of the cosmic body of Adam, or his own encounter on the road to Damascus in which Jesus identifies himself with those whom he is persecuting. For a review of these scholarly debates, see Gosnell L. O. R. Yorke, *The Church as the Body of Christ in the Pauline Corpus: A Re-Examination* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), 2–8, and Michelle V. Lee, *Paul, the Stoics, and the Body of Christ* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), introduction.

the head, which is the source of the body's life and growth. With this added meaning of headship within a body, the metaphor of the church as a body is used to express its relation of total dependence on Christ, its head and source of unity and life.

The meanings associated with the body continued to develop throughout the church's history. In the Middle Ages, the primary meaning of the body was that it has one head—it is neither acephalous nor a “two-headed monster.” This explanation of the image of the body was utilized by Boniface VIII in *Unam Sanctam* (1302) to assert the supreme spiritual and temporal authority of the pope alone over the church, as the one head of the one mystical body.<sup>81</sup> The conciliarist debates in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were expressed through conflicting interpretations of the body as well. For the papalists, the relationship between the head and the members of a body was one of superiority and subordination, respectively. For the conciliarists, it was the opposite—the body orders the head and ensures that its power and rationality is used for proper ends; moreover, the unity among the members enables the body to function even without a head.<sup>82</sup>

With the dawn of modern ecclesiology, the meaning and descriptions of a body shift once more. Influenced by German Romanticism, Johann Adam Möhler brought the root metaphor of the organism into Catholic ecclesiology. In *Unity in the Church*, he describes the church as an organic body—a living, growing organism, a material expression of a spiritual reality that continually develops over time yet always in relation to its original form. In his later work *Symbolism*, however, Möhler moves away from this organic interpretation of a body and instead sees the body as the visible presence or exterior expression of a transcendent person or identity. To say that the church is the “body of Christ” is to say that it is “the Son of God himself ... the permanent incarnation of the same.”<sup>83</sup> Instead of signifying a living, growing, and changing organism, “body” is equivalent to “self.”

Möhler's work influenced subsequent generations of theologians who fueled the mystical body movement in the early twentieth century, yet they

<sup>81</sup> Pope Boniface VIII, *Unam Sanctam*, in Frederic Austin Ogg, *A Source Book of Mediaeval History: Documents Illustrative of European Life and Institutions from the German Invasion to the Renaissance* (New York: American Book Co., 1907), 386.

<sup>82</sup> Francis Oakley, *The Western Church in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), esp. 157–74. See also Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>83</sup> Johann Adam Möhler, *Symbolism: Exposition of the Doctrinal Differences between Catholics and Protestants as Evidenced by Their Symbolical Writings*, trans. James Burton Robertson (New York: Crossroad Pub, 1997), 258–59, §36.

too held diverse understandings of the body. For Karl Adam and Romani Guardini, “body” signified a community of diverse members united as a stable whole; each individual believer “is a ‘cell’ in this great living organism, carried, arranged and united by the molding force which proceeds from the sacred Head.”<sup>84</sup> Similarly for Émile Mersch and the early Yves Congar—the body is a visible living organism animated by a single principle of life; in this body, the members share in the life of the one head. Moreover, a body is the instrument and manifestation of the soul, the principle of the body’s life.<sup>85</sup> In distinction, for the Dutch theologian Sebastian Tromp, a body is inherently hierarchical—it has diverse organs, each of which serves a particular function within the whole, but all of these organs are ordered by and under the head of the body, which as the seat of the nervous system is the source of sense-perception and self-movement. Tromp also specifies that a body is “something real, concrete,” as opposed to a shadow; it is “material and visible and needs to be quickened”; and it can also mean “person.”<sup>86</sup> In Pius XII’s encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* (ghostwritten by Tromp), the associative networks underlying the metaphor of the body are directly stated—a body 1) is an unbroken unity, 2) is definite, visible, and perceptible to the senses, 3) has a multiplicity of members linked together, 4) has organs with diverse functions that are structurally united and ordered, 5) provides for its own life, health, and growth, 6) has definite members, some healthier or weaker than others, and 7) these members work toward a common end.<sup>87</sup>

Unsurprisingly, these various images of the body have different ecclesiological consequences. For Paul, the metaphor of the church as a body highlights the diversity of functions and charisms within the one church, the importance of each Christian, and the intimate unity among all Christians within the church. In the Middle Ages, the image of the body was used to

<sup>84</sup> Romano Guardini, *The Church of the Lord: On the Nature and Mission of the Church*, trans. Stella Lange (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery, 1967), 5. See also Karl Adam, *The Spirit of Catholicism* (New York: Macmillan, 1924); Romano Guardini, *The Church and the Catholic*, trans. Ada Lane (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1953); and Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. Ada Lane (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1953).

<sup>85</sup> Émile Mersch, *The Whole Christ: The Historical Development of the Doctrine of the Mystical Body in Scripture and Tradition*, trans. John R. Kelly, SJ (London: Denis Dobson, 1962); Émile Mersch, *The Theology of the Mystical Body*, trans. Cyril Vollert, SJ (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1952). Congar discusses the mystical body of Christ in several texts, but his foundational early essays on the subject are found in Yves Congar, *The Mystery of the Church*, 1st ed. (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1960). See also Yves Congar, *Divided Christendom: A Catholic Study of the Problem of Reunion*, trans. M. A. Bousfield (London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1939).

<sup>86</sup> Tromp, *Corpus Christ, Quod Est Ecclesia*, 90–91.

<sup>87</sup> Pope Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis* §§14–18.



either justify or refute the supreme authority of the pope as head. Möhler's idea of the body in *Unity in the Church* provided a rich theology of tradition and the diachronic unity of the church, whereas in *Symbolism* it served to equate the authority of the church with the authority of Christ himself. Mersch's and the early Congar's use of the body-soul metaphor supported their identification of the institutional church as the visible manifestation of the "mystical body" and so their position that salvation is found only in the Catholic Church.<sup>88</sup> Tromp's and Pius XII's description of the body as united under and hierarchically ordered by a visible head was used to shore up the authority of the church's hierarchy and to justify membership in the church as applying only to those who are united with the Roman pontiff.

In other words, Flanagan, Healy, and others are right that ecclesial metaphors are interpreted within a theologian's broader agenda and are susceptible to ideological use. Theologians have always interpreted the corporeal metaphor in light of the philosophical, social, and scientific understandings of the body of their time. This is true even of the apostle Paul himself—his biblical image of the body is not acultural or ahistorical, but is rooted in Greco-Roman and Jewish notions of embodiment and corporate personhood and is used metaphorically to address his own particular ecclesial context. Moreover, the meaning of this metaphor is not static or controlled because the meaning of "body" is not static—not even in the (deutero) Pauline texts, as we have seen. My argument is that these are not reasons to do away with metaphor in systematic ecclesiology altogether, but to interrogate the associative networks attached to the vehicle of the metaphor so that the historical particularity of those interpretations can be identified, ideological usage can be resisted, and new visions can be unveiled.

It is precisely at this juncture that fields such as the natural and social sciences or various philosophies can aid the theologian and integrate the use of metaphor with the broader "empirical turn" in ecclesiology. As seen in the

<sup>88</sup> In Mersch's words, "If the Church is thus the 'body' whose soul is Christ,... it must be necessary with the necessity of Christ, of God, and of God's universal will to save. Therefore we must insist that salvation is not to be found outside the Church, and that submission to the Roman Pontiff is necessary for the salvation of every human creature"; Mersch, *The Theology of the Mystical Body*, 507. Congar writes in *Divided Christendom* that because the social body of the church is the visible expression of the mystical body, "there can be no salvation except in her" (59). The question of persons who are united to Christ and members of the mystical body, but are not members of the visible Catholic Church, is for Congar a question of the various ways in which one can belong to a body (i.e., "effective, plenary and visible" belonging versus "imperfect, invisible, and moral" belonging by desire). Anyone who belongs to the soul must *somehow* belong to the body; it is that manner of belonging to the body that needs to be explained. See Congar, *Divided Christendom*, 224–25.

history I have outlined, the meanings typically associated with the body have been 1) visibility, 2) clear boundaries and criteria for membership, 3) members or parts ordered by and obedient to a single head, and 4) coterminous with “self.” With these networks of meaning, the metaphor of the church as a body, and as the body of Christ in particular, has served anti-Protestant polemic and strongly papocentric accounts of ecclesial order and authority. The theologian can and must ask whether these past meanings associated with the body are scientifically, philosophically, or anthropologically adequate today, and explore what other networks of meaning are attached to the image of the body that might open up new visions for ecclesiology. In other words, what Paul did in his time—drew on the common philosophical and social meaning of the body in his day in order to say something about the Christian community—is, I suggest, precisely what we are to do in ours.<sup>89</sup> The abundance of literature on the body generated over the past sixty years—broadly known as “body studies”—provides a wide range of new associative networks that contain rich possibilities for reinterpreting the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ in our present ecclesial contexts.<sup>90</sup>

As one example of this, let us briefly consider a few of the meanings, descriptions, and visualizations of the body that we find in the writings of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty.<sup>91</sup> Although Merleau-Ponty does not set out to study the body as the direct subject of his analysis, his studies of behavior, perception, and language in *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible* reveal the absolute centrality of the body in human experience and undermine any dualistic understanding of the body as separate from the world. Merleau-Ponty describes embodied life as “intercorporeal,” that is, as constituted by its engagement with other bodies and the world. Perception is a fundamentally embodied phenomenon, structured by our “being-in-the-

<sup>89</sup> In other words, biblical theology can serve as a norm for our *method* of interpreting the metaphor rather than as norming the *content* of that interpretation, precisely because philosophical understandings of the body (the associative networks) have shifted dramatically between the time of Saint Paul and our own, and because it is both impossible and undesirable to pin down a single normative, ahistorical meaning of “the body.”

<sup>90</sup> “Body studies” incorporates a wide range of disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, history, anthropology, and medicine, to name a few insofar as they take the body as a locus of concern. For an overview of the field, see Bryan S. Turner, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Body Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2012), and Margo DeMello, *Body Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>91</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan & Paul, 1962); Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968). Merleau-Ponty’s work is rooted in empirical study within the fields of psychology and neuroscience.

world.” Perception is therefore always perspectival; to see an object is always to see it from *somewhere*. The embodied, perspectival nature of perception also means that my body can never be simply an object of perception for me, for it is the ground of possibility of my perceiving anything at all. I always observe myself as observer, as both subject and object simultaneously; I can never see or know myself and my body as pure object.

Merleau-Ponty’s study of perception also reveals that there is a “motor intentionality” or a directedness to our bodily existence; we are not just being-*in-the-world* but being-*toward-the-world*. This motor intentionality is, Merleau-Ponty argues, the source of our bodily unity; the body inhabits the world, acts in the world, and interacts with objects in the world without passing through an explicit cognitive function or needing guidance or direction from the “head.” The body exists for the subject as a unity (of limbs, parts, sensations) when and because it is engaged in meaningful, task-oriented action in the world. Our bodily being-in-the-world and motor intentionality also yield a “body schema,” a lived awareness of one’s phenomenal body-as-subject, which is the result of habitual action in a meaningful world. The body schema may or may not be continuous with our bodily morphology and can change over time. It can be expanded, rearranged, and renewed through the cultivation of habit, allowing a person to incorporate nonorganic objects into her body image and bodily existence. In Merleau-Ponty’s example, the blind person’s cane is part of his body—not an object that he perceives, but an extension of his body *through which* he perceives. This is not an organic unity as we typically think of the body, but it is nevertheless a unity of existence, of being-toward-the-world.

Finally, Merleau-Ponty points out that a body is not simply or straightforwardly visible or a total presence to the world. The body is the surface of an inexhaustible depth, both revealing and concealing its subject. It manifests personal existence and opens up to the world in self-transcendence, but can also be the site of our withdrawal from the world. To describe this, Merleau-Ponty considers the case of a young woman who, after being forbidden by her mother to see her lover, cannot sleep, loses her appetite, and loses the use of speech. Her body withdraws from the world and refuses to express personal existence or coexistence with the world. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “Bodily existence which runs through me, yet does so independently of me, is only the barest raw material of a genuine presence in the world.”<sup>92</sup> In other words, the body expresses total existence, but can also obscure, hide, and contract that existence. Personal existence is not identical to or reducible to biological existence. The body must be in the world, toward the world, open to the world, and lovingly received by the world in order to manifest personal presence.

<sup>92</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 165.

Merleau-Ponty's work can enable the metaphor of the church as a body to "compel new possibilities of vision" regarding the unity of the church, its membership, its practices of dialogue and consultation, and its relationship to Christ. First, the unity of a body is not the result of having a single head but of habitual inherence and intentional action in a world. This invites us to consider the mission of the whole people of God, rather than papal governance, as the foundation of ecclesial unity. This understanding of bodily unity contests one of the most enduring and anti-ecumenical interpretations of the metaphor of the church as a body in modern ecclesiology. Moreover, this bodily unity need not be thought of as a strictly organic or structural unity as it has been in the past. The body schema is dynamic and flexible, and incorporates within it whatever enables it to accomplish its task. Baptism and Eucharist admit a kind of substantial unity with Christ, incorporating us into his body in a particular way. But we might also think of other people of goodwill, members of other religions, and all those who participate in one way or another in the church's mission, regardless of religious affiliation or non-affiliation, as incorporated into the body of Christ.<sup>93</sup> Merleau-Ponty's challenge to dichotomies of subject/object, interior/exterior, and self/other urge us to reject exclusivist interpretations of the ecclesial metaphor of the body that presume that a body has clear and static boundaries.

Second, Merleau-Ponty's insight into the perspectival, embodied nature of perception urges the church to expand its practices of synodality and consultation (still limited even within the church!) to include non-Catholics, and perhaps especially former Catholics, in order to gain critical insight into its own bodily reality or institutional existence. The church may enjoy the fullness of the means of salvation, but as *Gaudium et Spes* and now Pope Francis emphasize, the church stands to learn much from the world—from the natural sciences, from psychology and trauma studies, even from business management.<sup>94</sup> The metaphor of the church as a body, limited in its own perception of itself, invites us to dwell on and develop these insights. A church that is truly *in* and *of* the modern world must humbly consider the possibility

<sup>93</sup> Compare to *Lumen Gentium* §15, other baptized Christians are joined or linked to the church (*coniunctum esse*); *Lumen Gentium* §16, those who have not yet accepted the gospel are "related (*ordinantur*) in various ways to the people of God." Pope Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, November 21, 1964, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).

<sup>94</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, December 7, 1965, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html), §44, and Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*.

that its own perspective on itself, on the world, and on revelation is limited and that other religious bodies might offer a unique contribution to the common quest for truth.

Finally, Merleau-Ponty's work invites us to rethink the relationship between body and self toward a more nuanced reading of the ecclesial body of Christ as mediating, but not being identical with—and sometimes even impeding—the presence of the Savior. The body, especially when suffering trauma, injury, or illness, can inhibit the self's engagement in the world and with other subject-selves. The church as the body of Christ is likewise capable of mediating but also inhibiting the presence of Christ. It is the necessary biological substratum, so to speak, but at times may be "only the barest raw material" of Christ's presence in the world. At the same time, the "self" also extends beyond the biological bounds of the body. As Anthony Godzieba puts it in his application of Merleau-Ponty's work, the body's intentionality toward the world is grounded in "its material-empirical substratum" but "thrusts us beyond" this as well.<sup>95</sup> Jesus' resurrected body is a sign of this duality: his resurrected body still bore his self-identity and his relationships, yet went beyond the materiality with which we are familiar. The body, as a biological-material substratum, bears and incarnates the "self," which ultimately exceeds the body. Extending this account to ecclesiology, we can affirm that the glorified Christ exceeds his ecclesial body; the church body *can* mediate Christ to the world, but Christ is not limited to and stretches beyond this biological or social-institutional reality, even at its best.

Phenomenology is not the only field that opens up new associative networks for this ecclesial metaphor; other perspectives on embodiment are also being brought into dialogue with the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ. Drawing from disability studies, Nancy Hale envisions the ecclesial body as a disabled body, such that the church exists in a marginalized yet critical relationship to the world.<sup>96</sup> Anne Hillman turns to womanist, feminist, queer, and disability theologies, their disruption of hierarchy, and their attention to bodily difference to reinterpret the metaphor of the body of Christ in light of religious pluralism.<sup>97</sup> Brianne Jacobs uses Judith

<sup>95</sup> Anthony Godzieba, "Bodies and Persons, Resurrected and Postmodern: Towards a Relational Eschatology," in *Theology and Conversation: Towards a Relational Theology*, ed. Jacques Haers and Peter de Mey (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 211–25; Anthony Godzieba, "Knowing Differently: Incarnation, Imagination, and the Body," *Louvain Studies* 32 (2007): 361–82. Quotations here from Godzieba, "Knowing Differently," 373.

<sup>96</sup> Nancy Jill Hale, "Dis-Abling the Body of Christ: Toward a Holistic Ecclesiology of Embodiment" (PhD diss., Boston University, 2015).

<sup>97</sup> Anne Hillman, "Being the Body of Christ: Rethinking Christian Identity in a Religiously Plural World" (PhD diss., Boston University School of Theology, 2017), v.

Butler's gender theory and the theological work of Johann Baptist Metz and M. Shawn Copeland to argue that the body "is shaped at the level of ontology not by sex, but by history."<sup>98</sup> Though she does not make explicit links to ecclesiology, her work offers rich possibilities for understanding the ecclesial body as constituted by its history—a useful correction to the critiques in the 1940s that mystical body ecclesiology was insufficiently attentive to the church in history, thus the preference thereafter for the "people of God." Soskice's inter-animation theory of metaphor provides the theoretical framework and impetus for continuing to explore the broad range of associative networks surrounding the body that might yield new insight into the church as the body of Christ.

### Conclusion

The proper response to the acknowledged limits of metaphor in ecclesiology is not to avoid their use altogether, any more than one's response to the limits of theology before the mystery of God should be to avoid theological discourse altogether. Ecclesial metaphors will always be with us. They appear throughout the New Testament and form an integral part of the scriptural and liturgical life of the church. As we have seen in Pope Francis, metaphors continue to stir the imagination and foster ecclesiological renewal. Like the parables in Scripture, metaphors "challenge, they evoke a sense of what is possible even if not yet realized, and they address questions to present practices."<sup>99</sup> They also frequently provide a necessary normative and aspirational vision for ecclesiology and lead us beyond any delusion that we might capture the mystery of God and the church in systematic, doctrinal statements. We must critically and creatively engage metaphors, reading them in light of the associated networks of meaning that attach to them today and situating them within a broader systematic ecclesiology. This approach does not necessarily resolve ideological conflict *between* various ecclesiological metaphors. What it does do is provide space in which the models and networks of meaning that underlie the vehicle of a metaphor can be examined for ideology, factual accuracy, or adequacy in light of other fields of knowledge. In turn, this invites the theologian to appropriate new or different networks of meaning consciously such that ecclesial metaphors might resist any single hegemonic interpretation and "compel new possibilities of vision" regarding the nature and mission of the church.

<sup>98</sup> Brianne Jacobs, "An Alternative to Gender Complementarity: The Body as Existential Category in the Catholic Tradition," *Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (2019): 328–45, at 329.

<sup>99</sup> Lennan, "The Church as a Sacrament of Hope," 273.