'Sacrament of the Dynamic Transcendence of Christianity': Cornelius Ernst on the Church

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Abstract

The new ontology of meaning proposed by Fr Cornelius Ernst OP as a means of articulating the Thomistic synthesis in the idiom of the modern era coheres around ecclesiology. Drawing upon the linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, Ernst sees meaning as the distinctively human praxis by which man 'subdues' and 'transcends' the world to which he belongs, thereby transposing it into the world that belongs to man. The Church, as the Body of Christ – who is personally the ontological meaning of history – is the distinctively Christian linguistic community of meaning, in which ultimate meaning – the 'meaning of meaning', i.e. God – is present in each successive era. Established in the illuminating event of Christ's incarnation, the Church is the sacramental institution that makes present Christ's re-integration of the plurality of human meanings, realising itself as a concrete community within the world, and realising the world authentically within itself. As the sacrament of the Trinitarian mediation of meaning, therefore, the Church is irreducibly both human institution and mystical communion, serving as the ontological a priori of faith, and thus the authentic locus of Christian theology.

Keywords

It is now fifty-five years since Fr Cornelius Ernst OP first introduced young English Dominicans to the Aristotelian-Thomistic teaching *de Anima* by an application of Wittgensteinian 'philosophy as therapy',[1] and there are few signs that the prejudices of the congenital Cartesianism against which he laboured are any less entrenched. Despite the truncation of his literary footprint by his early death

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[1] I am indebted to a collection of notes taken in Enst's 1957/8 Rational Psychology Class by the late Fr Austin Gaskell OP.

in 1977, the prescience of Ernst's theological thought is evidenced by the acknowledged influence he has exerted over figures such as Herbert McCabe OP, Fergus Kerr OP, and Rowan Williams, and it is not difficult to isolate trends in twentieth century theology that would have been easily integrated into his quest for a linguistically reconstituted Thomism. It is clear, for example, that his portrayal of Christianity as a 'language-event' (*Sprachereignis*),[2] embedded in the *Lebensform* of the particular linguistic community that is the Church,[3] would find points of affinity with Lindbeck's influential theory of doctrine as grammar, the communally determined 'rules' governing the shared use of religious terms, rather than a mere accretion of cognitive propositions or experiential expressions.[4]

Given the paucity of primary material, it is unsurprising that secondary literature exploring Ernst's legacy has been scarce: essays by Fergus Kerr OP[5] and Louis Roy OP,[6] which draw upon first-hand knowledge of Ernst, have done much to highlight his theological appropriation of Wittgenstein, and to trace the contours of his seminal theological ideas. A prominent feature of Ernst's literary legacy that remains broadly unexplored, however, is the explicitly ecclesiological coherence of his thought: Ernst's deployment of the Wittgensteinian disruption of the inner-outer picture is not merely a matter of rational psychology as a prolegomenon to theology proper, but is developed throughout his theological writings, and reflected in a distinctive ecclesiology. The prominence of the Church as a leitmotif of Ernst's writing, therefore, not only emerges as a consequence of the fact that he was tasked by the Order to teach ecclesiology to its ordinands,[7] but also from the shape of his theological project (aptly summarised as a quest for the 'new ontology of meaning'), which is resolved around vital ecclesiological coordinates. Writing in the wake of the ecclesiological developments at Vatican II, and in critical dialogue with Küng and Schillebeeckx,[8] Ernst is concerned to articulate a fresh and cogent ecclesiology in continuity with the theological tradition, not only as an article of the faith, but as an integral facet and pre-condition of theological method.

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[2] Cornelius Ernst, Fergus Kerr (ed), Timothy Radcliffe (ed), *Multiple Echo*. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), p. 33. [Henceforth cited as M.E.]

[3] M.E., p. 27.

[4] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. 25th Anniversary Ed'n. (London: WJK, 2009), pp. 65–69, *et passim*.

[5] Fergus Kerr, 'Anscombe, Ernst and McCabe: Wittgenstein and Catholic Theology', *Josephinum Journal of Theology*. 15.1 (2008) pp. 67–86; Fergus Kerr, 'Wittgenstein and Theological Studies', *New Blackfriars*. 63 (1982), pp. 500–508.

[6] Louis Roy, 'Cornelius Ernst's Theological Seeds', *New Blackfriars*. 85 (2004), pp. 459–470.

[7] cf., M.E., pp. 137*ff*.

[8] Cornelius Ernst, 'A Theological Chronicle', *New Blackfriars*. 41 (1960), pp. 220–227.

Ernst's Theological Programme: A New Ontology of Meaning

Ernst's work is marked by the conviction that philosophy has moved into an era in which its central concerns are addressed to the problem of meaning, and not understood in the pre-modern terms of the metaphysics of being.[9] The theological synthesis of St Thomas Aquinas was governed by the unifying theme of *esse*,[10] cohering around the metaphysical axiom that all the various entities that populate the world are (however analogically) united in a hierarchy of being participative and dependent upon God as *ipsum esse*,[11] with the essence of created substances distinct from, and passive to, the existence that they receive from God.[12] Ernst was concerned that the foundational principle of 'being', once transposed from the scholastic metaphysical lexicon into modern idiom, could not support the burden of Thomas's pre-modern dogmatic edifice. 'Being', in its ordinary, everyday, pre-conceptual sense, no longer alludes easily to the totality of all that is, and in shifting away from common use to a technical and contested terminology defined in a polemic context, has lost its conceptual plasticity as a unifying principle for a dogmatic world-view.

As an alternative unifying theme, Ernst proposes 'meaning', a pervasive reality of our life and a term freely used, apparently without the need for a developed conceptual theory of meaning as a prerequisite. Indeed, meaning is the theme that unifies the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein in both the diametrically opposed loci of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*: the insight of the latter was to undermine the former by highlighting the public and communal nature of meaning operative as a community's form of life (*Lebensform*),[13] and thus the wrong-headedness of conceiving of meaning as a mental event.[14] For all that the apparent pervasiveness of meaning lends itself to conceptual deployment as a unifying theological theme, it is not meaning in the commonly understood sense of the term that Ernst sought to appropriate: rather, it was meaning liberated from mentalistic prejudices by a dose of Wittgenstein's philosophical therapy. Indeed, Ernst observes that the theory of meaning implicit in scholastic theology presents meaningfulness as accessible only in ontic terms, via essentialist concepts coordinated with specific structures of the created world.[15] Whilst in

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[9] M.E., p. 20.
[10] St Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, §1.
[11] S.T. I, q3, a4.
[12] S.T. I, q44, a1.
[13] M.E., p. 21.
[14] P.I., §693.
[15] M.E., p. 83.

reality St Thomas's ontological thought transcends the rigid limits theoretically determined by his ontic epistemology (the "archaic theory of meaning" that Ernst periodically laments),[16] the philosophical legacies of Wittgenstein and Heidegger demand a new ontology of meaning, which does not limit 'meaning' to the scientific manipulation of conceptual generalities abstracted from particulars, but allows historical meaning to be authentically realised.

Despite the *prima facie* explosivity of this proposal, Ernst's theological orientation is fundamentally Thomist, taking St Thomas principally as the source of Dominican theologising, but not as its absolute norm.[17] Conscious that – in the eyes of the world – the Church's right to speak authoritatively must be earned by plausibility, Ernst's effort to integrate this new ontology of meaning into an authentically Catholic hermeneutic is governed by a distinctively Dominican concern: that truth might be "re-identified in the new idiom of each successive era",[18] and presented to the world with new clarity and intellectual plausibility, through a re-articulation of the Angelic Doctor's synthesis.

Indeed, the amenability of the Thomistic synthesis to re-articulation in terms of 'meaning' is grounded by Ernst's treatment of Aquinas as a thematic, rather than systematic, theologian. Clearly, Thomas's thought is systematic insofar as it is ordered in a recognisable argumentative structure and traces the contours of a synoptic world-view cohering around the unifying theme of *esse*.[19] Nonetheless, Ernst denies Aquinas systematicity at the deepest level, for his unifying theme (*esse*) admits the possibility of indefinite expansion of the scope of his metaphysical system, thus precluding systemic closure. The rejection of the univocity of being demands the denial of a community of genus between the divine *esse* and the existence of created substances:[20] the Thomistic world-view is not a univocal vision of a bounded set of substances within the genus of being, but establishes an analogical relationship between the divine *esse* and the infinite variety of created substances that participate (actually or potentially) within it. The boundaries of this community of analogy are, in principle, open to indefinite revision, as new substances are created or cease to be. The movable boundaries of the community whose limits are determined by the *analogia entis* corresponds, Ernst thinks, to the

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[16] e.g., M.E., pp. 83–5.

[17] English Province of the Order of Preachers, *Acts of the Provincial Chapter*. (1978), p. 41.

[18] M.E., p. 211.

[19] Cornelius Ernst, 'Introduction'. In: St Thomas Aquinas, '*The Gospel of Grace*', being vol. 30 of *Summa Theologiae* [I-II qq106–114], (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1972), p. xx.

[20] Roy, 'Cornelius Ernst's Theological Seeds', at p. 468.

infinite array of Wittgensteinian 'language games' a native speaker can meaningfully instantiate within a linguistic community.[21] The scope of meaning is, therefore, not a hermetically sealed autarchic system of finite points, but a living and organically developing organism, tethered to, and supervening upon, a community of life (which is already a communion in being).

The shift from the language of 'being' to that of 'meaning' does not involve, therefore, a Harnackian repudiation of metaphysics. Far from seeking an abrogation of classical ontological categories, Ernst's quest for a hermeneutical theology of meaning is dominated, as Nicholas Lash observes in his review of *Multiple Echo*, by an "almost obsessional preoccupation with ontology":[22] the claims of Christianity are irreducibly ontological claims, depending upon a communion in being which is coinherent with the order of meaning,[23] a reality that Ernst can interchangeably call an "ontology of meaning" and a "logic of being". Confined by an inadequate theory of meaning, Ernst sees neo-Thomist theologies as having settled for answers on the ontic level of facts, excluding the ontological outworking of the mysteric content derived from the sole substantive answer to human questioning, provided in the event of Christ's incarnation and Paschal mystery.[24]

Meaning as Process and Praxis

Such a theological ontology of meaning excludes the possibility of understanding meaning along either mentalistic and other-worldly ethereal lines:[25] the orders of being and meaning are united in Heideggerian *geschichtliches Dasein*, in the temporal and embodied historicity of human *Seinsgeschichte*. The ontological meaning of history is found in the event of the incarnation, which is the presence among us of ultimate meaning,[26] and thus the integrating principle through which human history ceases to be mere *Historie* and is transfigured into true *Geschichte*, which is most authentically understood as *Heilsgeschichte*. Thus the ontological, for Ernst, has a broader meaning than serving as a term of reference for Thomistic metaphysics:[27] it stands as something approximating a Heideggerian existential, arising out of our socially and temporally

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[21] Ernst, Introduction to 'The Gospel of Grace', pp. xx-xxi.
[22] Nicholas Lash, 'Listening to the Echo'. *New Blackfriars*. 61 (1980), pp. 89–93.
[23] M.E., p. 133.
[24] M.E., p. 85.
[25] c.f., M.E., p. 84.
[26] M.E., p. 75.
[27] M.E., p. 140.

embedded existence, as the condition and ground of any authentic instance of meaning.

"The mistake is to say that there is anything that meaning something consists in":[28] the force of Wittgenstein's argument against private language is to situate language – and therefore meaning – in the shared and public domain of the community.[29] As Wittgenstein observed, "nothing is more wrong-headed than calling meaning a mental activity",[30] for it is "primarily a process and a praxis".[31] Meaning is, moreover, the distinctive human praxis, irreducibly an event of personal communion-in-being: as a process and praxis "through which the world to which man belongs becomes the world which belongs to man",[32] it is a metaphorical enactment of man's vocation to 'till and subdue' (Genesis 1:28). Even as a creature, confronted by finitude and givenness, through the process and praxis of meaning, man is able to unite and embody the world within himself, and to participate in the priesthood of all believers through the anaphora of creation to God. Meaning, then, has as its *sine qua non* a personal world prior to the individual: language is fundamentally communicative,[33] meaning borne by community.

Ernst notes the proximity of the so-called Augustinian picture of language as rooted in the mapping of terms onto reality by ostensive definition[34]– against which the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* argued – to contemporary structuralist accounts of meaning.[35] Meaning, as a process and a praxis, cannot primarily be understood in terms of syntactical conglomerations that make non-meaningful elements meaningful by locating them within a structure, nor in semiotic terms as the particular concretisation of a symbol's primordial meaning (which nonetheless depends upon 'structure' within which its meaning is disclosed, even if this is often portrayed – in terms Ernst undoubtedly finds more congenial – as a 'context').[36] Rather, the process and praxis of meaning is marked by an essential holism, it is "as much social as individual, historical as natural, mythical as metaphysical",[37] emerging as the constitution of a meaningful culture that

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[28] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*. §16.

[29] P.I., §§244–271.

[30] P.I., §693.

[31] Cornelius Ernst, *The Theology of Grace*. (Notre Dame, Indiana: Fides Publication, 1974), p. 73.

[32] Ernst, *The Theology of Grace*, p. 68.

[33] e.g., Ernst, *The Theology of Grace*, p. 174–6.

[34] P.I., §§21–64.

[35] M.E., p. 53.

[36] M.E., p. 55.

[37] M.E., p. 55.

is the context of life.[38] Here, Ernst's new ontology of meaning has a foot in both continental and analytical traditions: concerned to engage a new, and authentically Catholic, hermeneutic in dialogue with Ebeling and Fuchs,[39] it is the linguistic turn of Ludwig Wittgenstein that enables the theological ontology of meaning to be embedded in the *Lebensform* of the Church.[40] The Church is the doxastic culture that, in its irreducibly visible, institutional, form, is the sacramental sign of the revelation of divine meaning,[41] the community in which the history of man becomes Sacred History.

Ernst's Personalism: The Trinitarian Mediation of Meaning

Just as Aquinas grounded his metaphysical hierarchy of being by reference to the primordial divine *esse*, so Ernst must secure the unity of the world of meaning by reference to a privileged primordial instance of 'meaning': God, understood as the "meaning of meaning",[42] the Triune community that is the source,[43] unification[44] and possibility[45] of meaning and thus the "nativity of the word".[46] Ernst's recurring leitmotif of the 'meaning of meaning' emerges through his own critical appropriation of the phrase as used in a dialogue between Claude Lévi-Strauss and Paul Ricoeur,[47] which he integrates into his conception of meaning as praxis. Whilst Ricoeur seems to posit the 'meaning of meaning' as an unexpressed primordial meaning that makes possible any expression of meaning, Lévi-Strauss resists any suggestion that meaning might exist in an irreducible form, making the characteristically structuralist move of making semantics dependent upon syntax.[48] Ernst's Wittgensteinian theory of meaning as process and praxis leads him to reject the notion of a primordial capital meaning upon which all subsequent meaning draws, together with the suggestion that meaning is always reducible to primitive non-meaningful (even pre-meaningful) elements. For Ernst, the meaning of meaning is not so much a meaning behind meanings, but that which makes meaning

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[38] Rowan Williams, '*Benedict and the Future of Europe*'. Speech given at Sant' Anselmo, Rome, 21st November 2006.

[39] M.E., pp. 33, 57, 61, 83, 126.

[40] M.E., p. 27.

[41] Cornelius Ernst, 'Introduction' In: Karl Rahner, Cornelius Ernst (tr), *Theological Investigations*. Volume I. (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1961), pp. xvi-xvii.

[42] M.E., p. 156.

[43] M.E., p. 55.

[44] M.E., p. 79.

[45] M.E., p. 34.

[46] M.E., p. 27.

[47] Paul Ricoeur, 'Réponses', *Esprit*. 31 (1963), pp. 628–53.

[48] M.E., pp. 52–3.

possible by a creative event of meaning. Thus Ernst's Wittgensteinian shift leads him to reject both Ricoeur and Lévi-Strauss (although it is easy to sense greater sympathy with the former), instead appealing to the Chomskyan notion of 'competence', i.e. the native speaker's ability to generate an apparently infinite array of meaningful sentences, as a means of breaking out of both semiotics and syntactics. Thus 'meaning' for Ernst is neither generated through a symbolic re-presentation of a chronologically prior meaning of meaning, nor the architectonic result of a conjunction of otherwise non-meaningful elements, but emerges as a "non-structured competence, which is the 'generating force' of both structure and symbol".[49]

The 'meaning of meaning', however, is not related to the human praxis of meaning as a Deistic principle isolated from the world by an unpassable *chorizmos* that admits only contrastive transcendence, nor as a quasi-pantheistic presence immanent in all articulated meanings. In the incarnation, Jesus Christ is the ontological presence of ultimate meaning in the world,[50] and faith is the "awareness of the presence of [this] ultimate meaning amongst us".[51] Ernst resolves the apparent antinomy between the contrastive transcendence and the radical immanence of the meaning of meaning, then, through a theology of mediation. Although the structure of this mediation of ultimate meaning is not treated in a discrete portion of Ernst's works (which are, after all, clusters of seminal essays rather than a complete and exhaustive systematics), it is nonetheless clear that this takes place on a Trinitarian leavening: appropriating the 'meaning of meaning' to Pateriology, this ultimate meaning is revealed in the Father's self-presentation in Jesus Christ, and re-presented by the Spirit in the gathered community of the Church.[52] As Ernst writes: "the *Deus absconditus* [. . .] is revealed in history and made concrete in a personal revelation of the Father in the incarnate Son, and re-presented in the linguistic community of the Church."[53]

Indeed, it is crucial to Ernst's synthesis that he conceives of the presence of ultimate meaning in the world in personal terms: Christologically conceived, it is not merely an epistemological construct, but an ontological revelation that brings transfiguration.[54] In tones reminiscent of both Irenaeus's *Adversus Haereses* and Karl Barth's Second *Römerbrief*, Ernst presents Christ as himself the personal

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[49] Cornelius Ernst, 'Preface to Theology', *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*. 2.1 (1971), pp. 1–8, at p. 4.
[50] M.E., p. 86.
[51] M.E., p. 156.
[52] M.E., p. 27.
[53] M.E., p. 27.
[54] M.E., pp. 236–237.

centre of divine revelation and the ultimate meaning of humanity,[55] personally inseparable from the revelation of ultimate meaning that he brings. The self-declaration of the meaning of meaning historically in the man Jesus of Nazareth is the disclosure of a world of meaning, accessible in faith. It is a "transcendental disclosure of meaning to and for men",[56] a mapping of an absolute semantic beginning onto a human person, from which the "meanings entertained and exchanged in the community"[57] flow. The life of Christ, as the life of *katallage* through which the world of man becomes the world of God, is thus the ultimate praxis of meaning, for it is the authentic ontological metaphor, through which the world to which man belongs becomes the world which belongs to the man,[58] Jesus Christ, in whom all human meanings find their unification.

The incarnation, therefore, has the character of an ontological (and not merely epistemological) illuminating event (a Heideggerian *Ereignis*, or 'coming into view'), through which humanity is imbued not merely with another meaning, nor with an array of new human possibilities for meaning, but with the radical and ultimate meaning that is the 'meaning of meaning'. Christ, as Emmanuel, God with us, is the 'genetic moment' of the Christian confession: the freely expressed and bestowed love of God in Christ has a newness (*Neuheitserlebnis*)[59] that is both radical and creative in its scope. In Wittgensteinian terms, this 'genetic moment' is one of ontological *Übersicht*: a place of ultimate and synoptic vision that provides the context (*Umgebung*) for all authentic meaning.

The life of Christians is the 'consecration' of this 'genetic moment', which takes place in the Church as the linguistic community in which the Holy Spirit continually re-presents God's *musterion* as the condition for the constitution of a new humanity.[60] Notably, then, Ernst co-ordinates ecclesiology with pneumatology: the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church is the Sponsal presence of Christ (for the mission of the Spirit is conjoined with that of the Son).[61] The Church, therefore, exists enhypostatically in the Spirit, having no existence apart from that conferred upon it by the Sponsal presence of the Spirit of Christ. The Christ-event, as the ultimate ontological transfiguration of creation, is a unique historical happening,

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[55] M.E., p. 75, p. 9.
[56] M.E., p. 79.
[57] M.E., p. 79.
[58] M.E., p. 75.
[59] M.E., p. 34.
[60] M.E., p. 218.
[61] cf., C.C.C., §485.

unrepeatable and complete, yet nonetheless made present in the Church, re-actualized and communicated in the life of Christians.[62]

The Church is, therefore, the effectual sign of the continued presence of the meaning of meaning in the midst of humanity, a sacramental prolongation of the incarnation, and an extension into every successive era of the *kairos* that brings with it the possibility of the transformation and transfiguration of human life.[63] This consecration takes place in a doxological integration into the ultimate and perfected event of worship of God the Father[64] – Christ's resurrection – which draws to itself all human religious possibilities.[65] This ontological participation in Christ's attitude of worship of the Father takes place by Sacramental initiation into the community of Christ's body, through the liturgical act of Baptism, which effects an ontological change in the recipient that amounts to a metaphysical de-individualisation, through which authentic personhood is realised by engrafting into Christ. The Trinitarian mediation of meaning, Christologically conceived and Pneumatically defined, is inherently personal, but never individualistic: personal being is, for Ernst, always a matter of communication, and is most perfectly realised in the subsistent perichoretic relations of the persons of the Blessed Trinity.[66]

Church as Institution: Against Ecclesial Nestorianism

Ernst's formal doctrine of the Church could aptly be summarised as prophylaxis against ecclesiological Nestorianism, through a re-ontologised vision of the Church as integrated institution and communion, proceeding under the rubric of the Church as sacrament. The dissociation of 'inner' from 'outer', which has infected theological anthropology, has likewise exerted influence over ecclesiology. A growing awareness of the Church as a mystical communion (consequent on Pius XII's *Mystici Corporis*) has led to an often subconscious devaluing of the institutional nature of the Church, resulting in a popular presentation of the Church as essentially the spiritual reality of the mystical communion of the baptised, only incidentally expressed in institutional form as a condescension to human nature. Indeed, with a growing awareness of the moral shortcomings of the empirical human community of the Church, and particularly of the clergy, this dissociation offers a means of affirming the moral impeccability of the 'true Church' (i.e., the mystical body) without denial of

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[62] M.E., p. 161.
[63] Ernst, *The Theology of Grace*, p. 74.
[64] M.E., p. 95, p. 34.
[65] M.E., p. 49ff.
[66] M.E., p. 106, fn. 16.

the patently fallible character of its members. Clearly, however, orthodox Catholic ecclesiology is bound to affirm the coincidence without absolute identity of the Church as mystical communion and human institution:[67] a quasi-Nestorian dissociation of institution from communion is as unthinkable as a monophysite doctrine of the Church as theandric, or a docetization of the human structures of the Church that implies a denial of the obviously sinful character of her members. Nor can the theologian acquiesce without significant qualification to the co-ordination of institution with 'humanity' and communion with 'divinity': what is required is integration without confusion of the two, so as "to revalue the institution as to let it appear as the plausible organ of the Church as mystery".[68] The theological resources for this integration Ernst draws primarily from *Lumen Gentium*'s codification of the Church as *sacramentum*.

The role of the Church in the Trinitarian mediation of meaning depends upon precisely such an awareness of the Church as *musterion*: it is only as an authentically human linguistic community that the Church can be the organic *Lebensform* of the Christian faith, but it is by the Sponsal presence of Christ's Spirit that it becomes the community in which ultimate meaning, the meaning of meaning, is present. This, indeed, is unsurprising: as the place of the ongoing revelation of God's mystery,[69] in the divine communication that theologians call grace, the Church – like the Sacraments – fits our human constitution, for grace builds upon nature without vitiating it. However, as a mystery of the faith, the Church cannot – in its divinely ordained holism – be subject to the ordinary categories of sociology, except in accord with the doctrine of analogy.[70] The quality of reality that the Church possesses is not, Ernst contends in markedly Barthian tones, that of being measured by a standard of reality, but as a realness that possesses and ontologically modifies the standard of reality itself.[71]

In a critical reading of Hans Küng's *Council, Reform and Reunion*,[72] Ernst critiques his presentation of Jesus Christ as the 'norm' of the life of the Church.[73] The appeal to the gospel and the person of Jesus Christ as a norm for the Church's faith and life is, for Ernst, unacceptably suggestive of an extrinsic relationship pertaining

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[67] Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*. (Cork: Mercier, 1955), pp. 301–4; cf. also the '*subsistit in*' of *Lumen Gentium*, §8.

[68] Cornelius Ernst, 'The Church as Institution', *New Blackfriars*. 47 (1965), pp. 26–31, at p. 27.

[69] M.E., p. 218.

[70] Cornelius Ernst, 'Gospel and the Church', *New Blackfriars*. 43 (1962), pp. 301–313, at p. 301.

[71] M.E., p. 158.

[72] Hans Küng, Cecily Hastings (tr), *The Council, Reform and Reunion*. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1961).

[73] Ernst, 'Gospel and the Church', passim.

between Christ and the institutional Church. Rather the gospel of Je-
sus Christ, understood not reductively in terms of a discrete collection
of writings but as "the whole life of the Church as a sign for faith"
bestowed upon it by Christ in the Apostolic era,[74] is principally a
source from which the Church's life of faith flows, continually made
present in the Church by the animating action of the Spirit. The
gospel becomes normative, in the strictest sense of that term, only
when it is interpretatively concretised by the teaching authority of the
Church and thus embodied in a dogmatic definition. In its primordial
form the gospel is therefore only potentially normative, becoming a
binding norm by way of a judgment made by the sole competent
authority – the teaching ministry of the Church's living Magisterium.
The Church is a living linguistic community of faith, in whom the
gospel is variously manifested, expressed normatively in regulative
terms in the magisterium. In Ratzinger's phrase, the apostolic suc-
cession is the form of tradition, whilst tradition is the content of the
succession:[75] revelation may have closed but it has not ceased, for
the Church is marked by the enduring presence of the revealing Spirit
of God.[76] To appeal to Christ as to a norm is to de-personalise him,
whom Ernst presents rather as the living judge than as an inert rule
of faith.

Indeed, in his response to Charles Davis' treatment of ecclesiol-
ogy, Ernst suggests that criticism of the institutional character of the
Church frequently misunderstands 'institution' as 'constitution', i.e.
as "a social structure of authority and governance".[77] For all that
it is an authentic human community, an exposition of the 'social
structure' of the Church is not exhausted within the competence of
the empirical sciences (e.g., of political studies or social anthropol-
ogy), but must primarily be understood in theological terms. This
observation enables Ernst to distinguish conceptually between the
essential, and therefore unalterable, pattern or structure bestowed on
the Church by God (which includes its hierarchical ordering and con-
stitution as a linguistic community, as well as the revealed Catholic
dogma concerning the ordained ministry and ecclesial jurisdiction)
from the particularities of the temporal embodment of this structure
in human history. Authentic reform of the Church consists in a living
and organic evolution of the latter in accordance with the former:
although Ernst does not cash this out by elucidating precisely those
aspects of the Church's life that he understands as being 'tempo-
ral embodiments' worthy of reform, it is clear that he understands

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[74]   Ernst, 'Gospel and the Church', at p307.
[75]   Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, (San Francisco: Ignatius
Press, 1982), pp. 239–249.
[76]   M.E., p107.
[77]   Cornelius Ernst, *Charles Davis and his Book*. (London: Ealing Abbey, 1967), p. 14.

Vatican II as having articulated the essential structure of the Church more in terms of an extension of the Apostolic ministry of preaching than of 'power' understood in secular terms.[78]

This recognition of the institutional Church as the organ of the divine *musterion* demands an account of the Church's ministry that penetrates beyond an ontic, functionalist, account to one in terms of a theological ontology of priesthood. The traditional distinction of sacramental power (*sacra potestas*) from institutional jurisdiction should not be understood as implying that the ontological significance of the priesthood resides solely with its sacramental power.[79] Rather, having been identified in a particular metaphysical way with Christ by his ordination, the priest (and most especially the Bishop) is a sacramental point of encounter with Christ for the people of God, not only in his cultic function, but in his person.[80] For Ernst, Vatican II's treatment of the priestly ministry in terms of a distinctive participation in the three-fold ministry of Christ as priest, prophet and king – that differs from the Baptismal priesthood in kind rather than degree[81] – is precisely such a holistic ontology of ministry.[82] This ontological treatment conceives of priesthood in terms of a distinctive participation in the Church's whole apostolic mission as inaugurated by Christ (and in which all the Baptised participate, according to their status), rather than as the ontic performance of discrete liturgical or jurisdictional functions. As an essential feature of the Church's divine constitution, the Primacy of the Bishop of Rome must likewise be understood as an ontological primacy, an emerging awareness of which Ernst believes will enable a separation of an authentic theology of the Papacy from the human ideology of papal power, which has at times been the vehicle of theological treatments of the papacy.[83]

Church as Eschatological Community: Apocalyptic Ecclesiology

An orthodox ecclesiology, therefore, involves both an empirical account of the Church's membership and a visionary account that grounds the ontological meaning of the Church beyond its visible manifestation.[84] Indeed, a non-reductive ecclesiology must account for the totality of the Church, in both its militant and triumphant

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[78] Ernst, *Charles Davis and his Book*, pp. 15–17.

[79] M.E., pp. 171–186.

[80] Cornelius Ernst, 'Priesthood and Ministry', *New Blackfriars*. 49 (1967), pp. 121–132, at p. 128.

[81] *Lumen Gentium*. §10.

[82] M.E., pp. 162–3.

[83] M.E., p. 173.

[84] M.E., p. 213.

modalities. If either visionary or empirical account is allowed to pre-dominate to the exclusion of the other, the transcendent-immanent dialectic that governs the Church's mediation of ultimate meaning will be ruptured, and the account of the Church as sacrament lost. A visionary account is a necessary means of sustaining the faith of the empirical Church militant, but a purely visionary account constructed from outside an awareness of the real particularities of the empirical Church's historical experience will inevitably have little purchase beyond the realm of an artificial (and thus inauthentic) theological discourse.[85]

Ecclesiology, then, must proceed 'from below', i.e. from the concrete experience of the particular Church, to an account of its transcendence as an *ecclesia in ecclesiis*, rather than from a quasi-'Platonic form' of the Church to its sacramental instantiation in local form.[86] This does not mean, however, that the Church's self-understanding always begins on the empirical level before proceeding to the ontological and visionary level. Rather it is an affirmation that the theologian's account of the Church is irreducibly bound up in the self-understanding of their own community of faith, and in proceeding from below is able to experience the phenomenology of salvation in diverse and inculturated ways, free from a hegemony of metaphysical absolutes enforced from above. As the Church is the linguistic community that makes possible faith, and therefore the self-critical praxis of theology, all theological treatments of the Church are always already bound up in both empirical and visionary accounts: treatises *de Ecclesia* do not fall from heaven, nor are they created *ex nihilo*.[87]

There are clearly, however, fixed co-ordinates of ecclesial identity, provided for in the Church's essential structure, that are not simply ineffable expressions of religious sentiment, but inherent to the Church's self-understanding in the grammar of theology. These are the Sacraments, the particular concrete realisations of the divine *musterion* in which the Church's own identity is most transparent to itself, normative manifestations of the Church's being as the community of Christ.[88] Here, Ernst's indebtedness to Karl Rahner's notion of the sacraments as instances of *Selbstvollzug* (the Church's self-realisation) is apparent:[89] these ritual expressions of the Church's faith are not merely sacred dramaturgy that provide a kernel around which the people of God unite (a reductively empirical account), rather they have the character of anamnesis, a memorial of the

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[85] M.E., p. 213–4.
[86] M.E., p. 214–8.
[87] M.E., pp. 139f, p. 43.
[88] M.E., p. 109ff.
[89] cf., M.E., p. 11.

primordial *musterion*, the 'meaning of meaning', which is made present within that sacramental memorial by the action of the Spirit. This is particularly evident in the paradigm case of the Eucharist, which is the normative gesture of Christian faith,[90] and the liturgical *synaxis* in which the Church most fully realises her identity on earth.

As the community of the continuing revelation of the divine *musterion*,[91] the Church's self-identity is always understood as eschatologically orientated:[92] the Church as a sacrament is an anticipatory sign of the eschatological 'real-presence'[93] of the Kingdom of God, and the pledge of the transfiguration of the Christian community into glory.[94] Ernst understands the Church, therefore, as a basileiological community, the sacrament of the reign of God,[95] oriented toward an eschatology that is simultaneously political and transcendent. In terms that Ernst would likely find agreeable, Metropolitan John Zizioulas has spoken of the eschatologically iconic character of the Holy Eucharist:[96] the Eucharistic *synaxis* is not merely a symbol of the Kingdom of God, in which all believers are gathered to Christ, but is a sacrament of that eschatological fulfilment, really making present the risen Lord and thus, in a hypostatic and provisional form, the Kingdom of God.[97]

The Church and the World: Consecration of the Genetic Moment in History

The conception of the Church as the sacrament of God's salvific purpose establishes an asymmetrical relationship between the Church and the world: as a linguistic community, the Church realises itself in the world, yet as the place of the ongoing revelation of the divine *musterion*, the Church realises the world authentically within herself.[98] In the re-presentation of the Christ-event to the world, in the forms of sacrament and tradition (and its content the gospel of Christian life), the Church establishes itself as a continuous process (the praxis of meaning) within the history of mankind. By assuming

[90] M.E., p. 201, p. 110.

[91] M.E., p. 218.

[92] cf., Donald MacKinnon, 'Revelation and Social Justice'. In: *Malvern 1941: The Life of the Church and the Order of Society*. (London, Longmans, 1941), pp. 81–116.

[93] M.E., p. 111.

[94] M.E., p. 237.

[95] M.E., p. 183.

[96] John D. Zizioulas, 'The Ecclesiological Presupposition of the Holy Eucharist' in: *The Eucharistic Communion and the World*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2010), pp. 100–111.

[97] John D. Zizioulas, 'Symbolism and Realism in Orthodox Worship' in: *The Eucharistic Communion and the World*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2010), pp. 83–97.

[98] Ernst, Introduction to Theological Investigations, p. vi-ix.

a world of meaning prior to itself, the Church transfigures the diverse plurality of human meanings, authentically realising the world in herself through the purification and sanctification of the world of human meanings through their integration into the Church's Sacred History of God, the meaning of meaning, *pro nobis* (*Heilsgeschichte*).

This realisation – by transference and transfiguration – of one world of meaning in another is what Ernst calls "ontological metaphor",[99] and as a process and praxis through which the world to which man belongs becomes the world that belongs to man, it is irreducibly an event of meaning. Here, the co-inherence of a communion-in-being with the *Lebensform* of a particular linguistic community is essential: the 'ontological metaphor' is neither reductively a change in human behaviour, nor a shift simply in the mode of language, but a fundamental change in the mode of life. In short, the ultimate ontological metaphor – the resurrection of Christ[100] – is re-presented in the Church and its transfiguring power is appropriated and applied in the life of Christians.[101] The unique new meaning of life wrought in Christ's resurrection is made accessible in the life of faith, which is itself an ontological metaphor,[102] the sacrament of which (Holy Baptism) confers a personal participation in the ultimate ontological metaphor of the resurrection, as the perfect act of worship. The victory of Christ over the world in the resurrection is the distinctive 'ontological novelty' of the Christian confession. The Church exists as the sacrament of this dynamic transcendence, making possible the entry of the individual into the eschatological victory of Christ, by faith.[103]

"The life of the Church is at least the life of an historical community, nourished by the Spirit":[104] history and temporality are not regrettable accidents of the Church's earthly existence, but the essential form of its mission. Whilst some theological treatments of time have co-ordinated the fleetingness of temporality with a loss of unity through the de-centring consequences of sin, for Ernst time is not principally a category of hamartiology but of soteriology. Time is the vessel of God's saving activity in the person of Christ, and the vehicle through which that ultimate ontological transfiguration is personally appropriated in the ontological metaphor of our individual lives in the Church.[105] The Church, as a continual 'happening'

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99 Cornelius Ernst, 'Meaning and Metaphor in Theology', *New Blackfriars*, 61 (1980), pp. 100–112, at p109.

100 M.E., p. 75.

101 M.E., p. 236.

102 Ernst, 'Meaning and Metaphor in Theology', at p. 112.

103 Ernst, Priesthood and Ministry, at p. 122.

104 Ernst, Introduction to Theological Investigations, p. vi.

105 cf., the proposed 'musical ontology of time' in: M.E., pp. 106–9.

of meaning under the animating direction of the Holy Spirit, takes the form of a *conversatio* between the Church and the world,[106] in which the Church assumes and purifies a prior world of meaning through the ontological metaphor of faith, and proclaims to the world afresh the saving meaning of Christ. This economy, marked by the incarnation, is one that takes place in the world, but nonetheless as a confrontation of the world:[107] the post-Constantinian Church is not involved in the sacralisation of civil institutions, but in the consecration of revolt.[108] The provocative language of revolt, perhaps reminiscent of the 'revolt' and 'protest' spoken of in the works of Donald MacKinnon,[109] is a recognition that the Church, as the presence of ultimate meaning in human history, stands against all structures of sin and false meaning. Rather than a call to violent uprising, it is a call to the Eucharist, the ultimate moment of uprising against the disorder of the world, and to the consecration of an authentically historical growth and transfiguration.[110] This consecration of change is nothing other than the ontological metaphor of faith, the consecration afresh of the genetic moment in each successive era, and the outworking of the nuclear complexes of ecclesial meaning, found in the Paschal mystery, in the idiom of a new age.

Conclusion: Church and Theology

In nuce, the Church is the *Lebensform* of faith, the human linguistic community in which a new world of meaning is made present and accessible by the Spirit. Faith, therefore, has an inevitable and irreducible ecclesial character,[111] and the Church can be described as the ontological *a priori* of faith.[112] As ontological *a priori*, the Church is not simply a noetic pre-theological condition to faith in terms of a general epistemology, but a theological pre-supposition in the order of ontology. The Church is thus the *sine qua non* of the ontological metaphor of faith, the community which is itself wrought in the ultimate ontological metaphor of Christ's resurrection, and which makes possible theological epistemology by its participation in the Trinitarian mediation of ultimate meaning. The inevitable activity of this linguistic community is theology, the activity of self-understanding in

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[106] Ernst, Introduction to Theological Investigations, p. viii.

[107] M.E., p. 128.

[108] M.E., p. 170.

[109] Donald MacKinnon, 'Christology and Protest'. In: Deborah Duncan Honoré (ed), *Trevor Huddleston: Essays on his Life and Work*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 175–187.

[110] M.E., pp. 169–70.

[111] M.E., p. 78.

[112] M.E., p. 139.

light of the presence of ultimate meaning.[113] Whilst there are those in the Church who are marked out by calling as 'professional' theologians (the *didaskaloi* of Acts 13:1), every Christian life – whether implicitly or explicitly – is a theology, a process and praxis of meaning in which the personal horizon of individual meaning is integrated into the Sacred History of the Church.

Authentic theology is therefore an encounter between the Church, as the enduring sacramental presence of ultimate meaning in human history, and the world of human meanings. The internal basis of theological epistemology inevitably meets the external, and authentic theology, as the life of faith, is always both a response to interrogation by the world of human meanings,[114] and a witness and testimony to the enduring presence of ultimate meaning.[115] Realising itself in the world but not structured or conditioned by it, the Church's liminality is its 'border' between two worlds of meaning: the horizon of encounter and transfiguration on which the human world of meaning is assumed and sanctified, being authentically realised within the Church. Theology, therefore, is not simply an ontic matter of proclamation in words or appeal to arguments, but the ontological integration of a culture that organically communicates a way of life.[116] In the ontological metaphor of faith, and its correlate the reflexive praxis of theology, there can be no definitive reification of 'contemplation' from 'action', for theology is a holistic and contemplative engagement with the world, an "entrance into the Christian meaning of time by way of the Christian meaning of our times".[117] This ecclesial conception of theology as encounter and witness expresses an authentically Dominican understanding of preaching as a natural expression of Christian life, organically emerging from the whole historical tapestry of faith.

In conclusion, the reader of Ernst's work is left with an unavoidable sense of the breadth of his doctrinal and cultural mastery, and of the deep penetration of his theological vision. Nonetheless, any evaluation of his theological synthesis must concede a certain ambiguity with regard to its success. For all that his new ontology of meaning was intended to open theology to a renewed engagement with the world, the observation of the *New Scientist* magazine that his 1972 lecture on the 'Limits of Human Nature'[118] "[p]ossibly makes sense to other theologians"[119] indicates that the resultant

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[113] M.E., p. 30, p. 43.
[114] M.E., p. 221.
[115] M.E., p. 211.
[116] M.E., p. 144.
[117] M.E., p. 151.
[118] Published at M.E., pp. 225–238.
[119] Caroline Smith, 'The Week Ahead'. *New Scientist*. 3rd February (1972), p. 280.

theological synthesis was largely confined to the "artificial world" that Ernst was trying to escape.[120] Even the theologically astute reader can comment on the almost impenetrable over-complexification of his work,[121] and wonder whether he says anything at all without "qualifying it out of existence":[122] the condensed profundity of his aphorisms (e.g., 'the meaning of meaning', 'the consecration of the genetic moment', etc) does not always mitigate for lack of perspicuity. Nonetheless, Ernst's thought has, and will no doubt continue, to exercise considerable influence over English Dominican theology. Perhaps the greatest compliment is to apply to him, in all sincerity, the words with which he praised Ludwig Wittgenstein: to read his work is to "encounter [an] example of philosophical depth and integrity, a standard of seriousness, by which [we] could, and can now, measure [our] own deficiencies."[123]

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[120] M.E., p. 214.
[121] Aidan Nichols, *Catholic Theology in Britain: The Scene Since Vatican II*. At: http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/anichols/theolog1.html [Last Accessed: 13th November 2012; Last Updated: 18th July 2009].
[122] Simon Tugwell OP, 'Cornelius Ernst OP'. *New Blackfriars*. 59 (1978), pp. 2–4.
[123] M.E., p. 13.