The Church Part 1: Who is the Church?

The term "church" is used in many different contexts. Sometimes it refers to a building, other times to a group of people or a community, sometimes it refers to an organization or a theological concept. But what do we mean by "church"? The original meaning and context for church comes from the Greek word εκκλησια (ekklesia) which means "those called out" (ek – out, kaleo – to call). Namely the term church referred to those people who were called out (of the world, from society) to form a new group. Over the course of the last 20 centuries the church has reflected upon herself to understand what we mean by church. This topic will explore the various ways in which we understand who we are as church.

Models of the church

The best way to understand the church is through models: depictions or images that inform our understanding of a complex issue. The American theologian Cardinal Avery Dulles wrote a foundational book that explored this concept and explained these various models called *Models of the Church*. I will draw from that book and some other sources as we explore who the church is.

The Institutional Church

The Institutional Church is the most recognizable and evident form of the church. This model focuses on images of hierarchy and order like a business or government. The institutional church model is best expressed by the legal system, order, and leadership model we are all familiar with. Although we are rather familiar with this model of the church, few people are aware of how the church actually functions.

The hierarchy: we cannot dismiss the fact that the church has a clear hierarchy from the people to the pope. The hierarchy has a structure and form to it and also directionality. The pope, who bears many titles, is the leader of the Catholic Church. Jesus is the head of the Church, but the pope is his vicar, the person who stands in his place. Under the pontificate of St. Pope Gregory the Great, he added a new title to the pope that more fully expresses his role: servant of the servants of God. The role of the pope is not necessarily to lead but to lead by service guiding the people of God to God. Each pope chooses the method for choosing his successor. In the early ages of the church the process was simpler and could include any male who was unmarried. The process has become more streamlined. St. Pope John Paul II limited the papabile, or those who could become pope, to those cardinals under the age of 80. Once the pope has died, the church goes into a period of mourning for normally 15-20 days. Then the cardinals assemble in Rome and begin the process of electing a new pope called conclave. All cardinals that are eligible to become pope participate in conclave. The conclave always begins with a Mass and a period of prayer. Then the cardinals are locked in the Sistine Chapel and vowed to absolute secrecy. For the first four days of conclave four votes are taken each day, two in the morning and two in the evening. These votes need a 2/3rds majority to declare a new pope. After the votes are taken, the ballots are mixed with either a substance to create black smoke indicating no pope has been chosen or to create white smoke to indicate a pope has been chosen. After four days without a majority vote for a particular candidate, the cardinals take a day for prayer. After the day of

prayer, the votes reduce to two a day and the necessary number of votes is a simple majority. This process continues until a pope is chosen. The chosen cardinal who is now the pope chooses a new name, is fitted in new vestments, and appears before the world for the first time.

Who are the cardinals? The cardinals are advisors to the pope. They can either be archbishops, bishops, priests, and even women. Most of the time when a cardinal is chosen, he is already a bishop or archbishop but sometimes the election to the role of cardinal leads to his ordination as bishop. Cardinals are usually put in charge of the various congregations, subcommittees of the Vatican, to oversee their work. Cardinals are chosen by the pope and require no other formal process than papal choice. Most of the time they come from prestigious dioceses throughout the world. Only cardinals who are male and under the age of 80 can participate in conclave.

Who are the bishops? Bishops are men who are put in charge of dioceses or congregations or causes. Bishops contain the fullness of the priesthood meaning that they can celebrate all of the Sacraments. Only a bishop can ordain a priest, and only bishops can ordain bishops. In order for a bishop to be validly ordained, three other bishops must be present for the ordination and lay hands on him. The symbols for a bishop are the ring, signifying that he is wedded to his people, the crosier, the long shepherds' staff that signifies that he is the shepherd of his people, and the miter, the two-pronged hat that signifies that he is successor of the apostles and the Holy Spirit has come upon him. The process of naming a new bishop is complicated. In each region of the world, bishops of that region are responsible for submitting names of potential bishops to the Vatican. The Congregation for the Clergy reviews these names and then awaits the movement, retirement, or death of a bishop. Upon the need for a bishop, they review the names and choose three names. These names are sent to the pope for approval. The pope can choose to do any of the following: accept a name, name someone else, or reject all the names. Once someone has been chosen, the Apostolic Nuncio, the person the pope appoints as his liaison to that region, calls that person and asks whether he accepts the nomination. If he accepts, there is a new bishop. If he rejects it, the process starts again. The role of the bishop is to oversee and shepherd the flock entrusted to his care. A bishop presides over a diocese and archbishops preside over an archdiocese. The difference between a diocese and an archdiocese is prestige and historical precedence. For instance the Archdiocese of Portland is the 1st diocese in Pacific Northwest, therefore it warrants the title Archdiocese. Dioceses are divided by geographical space and are autonomous. Only the pope has authority to tell a bishop how to lead his diocese. Within that division, the dioceses of the world are divided into two larger categories, metropolitans and conferences. The metropolitan is always an archdiocese that has some control over its suffragan dioceses in terms of legal disputes or issues that could not be handled interiorly. The Diocese of Helena is a suffragan to the Archdiocese of Portland. Each country has its own regional conference of bishops. The United States has the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops that oversee matters related to the Catholic Church in the United States. Two other forms of bishops exist: auxiliary bishops and titular bishops. Archdioceses have a much larger population than a diocese and therefore require more needs. Archbishops tend to have bishops under them called auxiliary bishops who perform the work of the bishop but do not have the authority of the archbishop in terms of administration and leadership. Archdioceses can have any number of auxiliary bishops. Each bishop is required to have a territory of which he is responsible for

leading. If a bishop is an auxiliary or in charge of a congregation or cause, then he has no territory he is responsible for leading. To solve this issue, the pope gives him a historical area that no longer exists so that he has a form of territory, and thus he would be called the titular bishop of that region. The minimum age for a bishop is 35.

What is a priest? A priest is a man who is ordained to provide the Sacraments and to shepherd the people of God. Priests work under a bishop and are given the authority to celebrate the Sacraments from the Bishop. Priests are called by God to perform this ministry. Not all priests are pastors, these are two different roles. The process of a man becoming a priest is complicated. The rules for the United States are a man must be accepted by a diocese or congregation and have sufficient formation in a seminary before he can be admitted to the priesthood. In addition to these rules were added a background check, a psychological evaluation, and a physical evaluation. Each bishop has a vocations director who works for the promotion of vocations and the support of those who are in formation to become priests and a personnel board who advise the bishop on those men who are desiring priesthood. The process of calling a man to the priesthood has two poles: the man must feel called and willing to accept this responsibility and the church must accept his calling. The Church ultimately calls the man forward and ordains him for the service of the People of God. Priests can be in roles of service other than leading a congregation. They can be teachers, administrators, military chaplains, hospital chaplains, and many other roles. The minimum age for a priest is 25. Priests can celebrate any Sacrament except Holy Orders, in other words priests cannot ordain priests or bishops.

What is the difference between and pastor and an administrator? An administrator is a person who is in charge of a church, congregation, people, or organization. According to the laws of the church, any person can become an administrator. Bishops tend to prefer priests to be in the role of administrator since they are bound by obedience to the bishop. Many situations exist in which non-ordained people were put in charge of parishes as administrators. The role of pastor is a specific designation that comes with rights and privileges. According to the Code of Canon Law, the legal system for the church, a pastor cannot be moved from his position as pastor without his consent unless his term is concluded. Each pastor term is six years with the possibility of one renewal. Bishops can waive the renewal limitations as they see fit. Priests who are in the role of rector, such as a cathedral or seminary, may not have terms or term limits depending on their assignment.

What is a deacon? A deacon is a man who is ordained for service. Deacons promise obedience to their bishop and can assist priests and bishops in their sacramental duties. Deacons tend to be married but cannot remarry after being ordained a deacon. The primary roles of the deacon are service at Mass, baptisms, marriages, funerals, and administration.

Religious Communities

The order and structure of religious communities, monasteries and convents, is varied. Each community sets the rules for the regulation of their community and the inner workings of their congregations. Generally each community is headed by one person and overseen by another subsegment of their community. Every religious takes the same basic vows: poverty, chastity,

and obedience. These vows are called the evangelical councils. Although these are the same vows across all religious, each community expresses them in different ways as adapted to their specific charism. These vows are made to God and can only be dispensed by the pope. In contrast to the vows, priests make promises to their bishop which can be dispensed by the bishop. I am going to talk about three types of religious communities.

Autonomous communities: the primary example of an autonomous community is the Benedictines. They formed as an order before the law systems were in place and thus grandfathered their own level of autonomy. Each Benedictine monastery and convent are completely autonomous and only pledges filial obedience to the abbot. The abbot is responsible for keeping order and the correct form of life in the monastery. Each monastery and convent set their own rules for electing an abbot or abbess for their house. The abbot or abbess then leads the congregation and those monks or nuns are bound by strict obedience to the abbot or abbess.

Medicant Orders: most of the other officially established orders within the Catholic Church fit into this category. Since they have houses and ministries throughout the world, the world is broken into smaller regions called provinces. These provinces have a provincial who oversees those houses and congregations within his/her region. The provincial is overseen by the superior general who has direct control over the entire order. Example. The Dominicans have four provinces within the United States, the eastern, central, southern, and western. These provinces are overseen by a provincial who take orders from the Superior General of the Dominican Order. All are obedient to the pope, but by differing levels. Many orders are bound by filial obedience and are allowed to operate semi-autonomously as an order. The Jesuits are the sole outlier. At their inception, the Jesuits wrote into their constitutions to be obedient to the pope as the head of their order.

Congregations: Many other forms of religious communities exist that are not considered orders. These communities are usually semi-autonomous in that they have an approved constitution from Rome and live in their own house with their own rules and regulations. Even though they sound autonomous, they have obedience to Rome and to the bishop in the territory they reside in. The bishop can choose to allow them to remain in his region or force them to leave, but he cannot change their rule of life unless it is not being followed or conflicts with the church.

Who are the laity? The word laity comes from the Greek word λαος (laos) which means people. So the laity are the people of the Church, those not bound by vows or promises, or those not ordained or consecrated. The clergy and religious get a huge amount of attention in the church and almost overshadow the importance and necessity of the people of God. The laity are responsible for the mission of the Church. They are the ones in the trenches who deal with the modern world and bring that world to God to be gifted to him and consecrated by him. The laity's principal role is to bring the Church to the people of the world through their daily lives. Without the laity, the church could not function.

The Church as the Bride of Christ

The first model is a relational model: the church as the bride of Christ. Jesus himself proclaims this truth in the Gospels and the Book of Revelation also emphasizes this model. Basically Jesus, the bridegroom, created his bride out of the people of God. The specific expression of this bride is the Church. The Church Fathers noted that the blood flowing from Jesus' side on the Cross is like him birthing the church into existence. As a bride, Jesus loves the Church and gave himself for her sake, as St. Paul says in the Letter to the Ephesians. Jesus will eventually take his bride to himself, into his home, wash her clean in his blood, and present her to his Father as his spotless bride (see Revelation 21). This model focuses on the world to come or the heavenly reality of the church.

The Church as the Herald of the Gospel

The main role of the Church is to preach the message of Christ and to bring all people into this reality. Thus the Church's role is to preach, preach the message of Christ. She does this in many ways. The first way is to proclaim that God exists, that Jesus suffered and died for our sins, and that there is hope for a world to come. The second way is to call people to repentance and forgiveness. The third way is to proclaim truth. God is truth and his ways are truth. So by proclaiming what is true, she proclaims the proper way to be as the people of God.

The Church as the Pilgrim People

The model has shaped the way we build our churches. We are a people who are already and not yet. We are already the people of God whom God has called out and taken to himself. But we are also a people on a journey, journeying to the one God and the one place of encounter, to Heaven. In this way we are a pilgrim people who have our sights set on God and are wandering through this trackless land awaiting our arrival in the Promised Land.

The Church as the Perfect Society

This model was much more popular and commonly used during the 17th through 20th centuries. During this age the church was seen as the model for a functional society. Therefore people understood the church's laws and moral teachings as the necessary way to build a perfect society. This model was emphasized by many popes during Middle Ages until people began to realize the church's corruption, the beginnings of modernism and the turning away from faith. The idea of the church as the perfect society is still held as an ideal: we will eventually be the perfect society once we are all in Heaven.

The Church as Mystical Communion

This model is highly emphasized in the modern age of the church. Through the use of Eucharistic imagery and a focus on our common fraternity across Christianity, many people turn to this model both for guidance on morality as well as to understand Christianity. The basics of the model is that we are all mystically united as one through our common baptism and union with Christ. The expression of our union is the reception of the one bread and one chalice at communion.

The Church as the People of God

This model is one of the easiest to understand: we are God's people. He chose us, called us, and made us into one by his power. Thus we are God's people. Even the Old Testament is clear that the Jewish people understood themselves as the people of God. The difficulty in this model is that we tend to think of it too narrowly, as though the Catholic Church is the only people of God. The People of God includes anyone who is grafted onto Christ and has been made his people through Baptism. Expanding this view helps us to recognize all the variety of people who are considered God's people.

The Church as Sacrament

When we think of the word sacrament, we usually think of the seven sacraments of the Church or the Blessed Sacrament. The word sacrament, even in church writings, is far more expansive. The word sacrament means an expression of God – a concrete reality that when you bump into you bump into it, you bump into God (Abbot Jeremey Driscoll). So, whenever we celebrate a sacrament or have a sacramental, we are doing something or using something that tells us about God and what he wants from us. The same works for the Church. The Church is an expression of God to the world. Through her teachings, lived experiences, and faith, she tells the world of God's existence and guides people to seek and understand God.