THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

The Contribution of Joseph A. Komonchak to the Theology of the Local Church in Light of
Lumen Gentium

A DISSERTATION

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The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) retrieved several ecclesiological themes which had become deemphasized in the course of modern history. One of these themes is the theology of the local church. The rediscovery of the local church and its recognition as a full ecclesial reality has become after the council a catalyst for several creative developments. It grounded the implementation of the liturgical renewal and led to the emergence of the so-called local theologies. It also resulted in a greater appreciation of the various cultures in which local churches exist and has been a source of hope that the church would become less centralized and more collegial. In many ways the theology of the local church could be characterized as that on which the ecclesiological vision of Vatican II stands or falls.

This study presents, analyzes, and evaluates the contribution of Joseph A. Komonchak (1939–), Professor Emeritus at The Catholic University of America, to the theology of the local church. The methodology employed is historical, expository, analytical, and evaluative. After a brief introduction, the study presents and analyzes Komonchak’s ecclesiology, with emphasis on his theology of the local church. The final chapter evaluates the contribution and significance, as well as strengths and weaknesses of Komonchak’s theology of the local church. In terms of its results this study identifies three areas of Komonchak’s contribution to the theology of the local church: (1) the significance of locality, (2) the understanding of catholicity, and (3) the relationship of the local and the universal church. The study also demonstrates that
Komonchak’s theology of the local church is grounded in the kind of foundations he envisions for ecclesiology. Lastly, it identifies two areas of Komonchak’s theology of the local church which seem to require further development: first, the application of the intersubjective ontology of the church to the relationship of the local and the universal church; second, concerns the definition of the term “universal church.”
This dissertation by Martin Madar fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Systematic Theology approved by Rev. John P. Galvin, S.T.L., Dr. Theol., as Director, and by William P. Loewe, Ph.D., and Christopher J. Ruddy, Ph.D., as Readers.

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For my family
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INTRODUCTION

The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) retrieved several ecclesiological themes which in the course of history had become deemphasized, if not forgotten. One of these is the local church. After the Gregorian Reforms in the eleventh century, when Catholics spoke about the church, they usually thought of the universal church or the whole church, that is, the church governed by the pope. This church was like a single country that encompassed the whole world. Dioceses and parishes were not considered churches the same way as the universal church; they were deficient in their ecclesial character. They were basically seen as administrative units of the whole church. Vatican II corrected this view, not by inventing something new, but by recovering an ancient conception of the church as communion of local churches. Although not systematic in its treatment of the local church, one thing the council taught about the local church is clear, and no one has expressed it better than Jean Jacques Allmen: “Une Église locale est entièrement Église, mais elle n’est pas toute l’Église.” 1 The council restored the local church to its full ecclesial reality and reinserted into Catholic ecclesiology the conception that the universal church is the church of churches.

This rediscovery of the local church has become after the council a catalyst for several creative developments. It grounded the implementation of the liturgical renewal mandated by Vatican II. It led to the emergence of the so-called local theologies. It resulted in a greater appreciation of various cultures in which local churches exist and was the catalyst for the so-called notion of inculturation. It was also a source of hope that the church would become less

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1. “A local church is wholly church, but it is not the whole church.” Irénikon 43 (1970): 512–37, at 512.
centralized and more collegial. In many ways thus the theology of the local church could be characterized as that on which the ecclesiological vision of Vatican II stands or falls.

Joseph A. Komonchak has been one of the leading Catholic voices in the United States in the area of ecclesiology in the post-conciliar period. This study seeks to present, analyze, and evaluate his contribution to the theology of the local church. Methodology employed will be historical, expository, analytical, and evaluative. This study will open with a biographical introduction of Joseph A. Komonchak followed by a discussion of the most significant influences on his thought.

The second chapter will consist of three parts. Part one will outline the retrieval of the theology of the local church in the decades prior to Vatican II, and situate the council’s treatment of the local church within a larger context of the theological renewal in the first half of the twentieth century. Part two will examine the documents of Vatican II and their treatment of the local church. The main focus will be on the “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” *Lumen gentium*. Part three will present some of the trajectories the theology of the local church took in the work of theologians after the council. This will be illustrated with a discussion of the main characteristics of the theologies of the local church of Leonardo Boff, Joseph Ratzinger, and Jean-Marie Roger Tillard, who developed their ecclesiologies after the council, and who furthered the council’s reception of the theology of the local church. Methodologically, this chapter will situate Komonchak’s theology of the local church in the post-Vatican II ecclesiological scene, and it will serve as a point of reference for the last section of this study in which I will evaluate Komonchak’s thought vis-à-vis the conciliar documents and other theologians.
The third chapter will examine Komonchak’s interpretation of the Second Vatican Council as a whole and its ecclesiology in particular. Komonchak’s position on the hermeneutics of the council will be discussed with regard to three issues: (1) the responsibility of the council for the collapse of pre-Vatican II Catholicism; (2) the continuity and discontinuity of Vatican II with the tradition; and (3) the dynamics between the “letter” and the “spirit” of the council. This will be followed by a discussion of Komonchak’s understanding of the significance of Vatican II for ecclesiology. Methodologically, this chapter will narrow the focus of this study on Komonchak and will provide the necessary context for the investigation of his contributions to ecclesiology.

The fourth chapter will examine Komonchak’s contribution to method in ecclesiology and its impact on his theology of the local church. The chapter will consist of four parts. Part one will outline the context for Komonchak’s engagement with methodological issues in ecclesiology. Part two will identify what in Komonchak’s view is the central problem for ecclesiology. Part three will present Komonchak’s vision of method for ecclesiology in general. It will identify the methodological categories Komonchak developed in order to engage the central issue in ecclesiology in a critical and systematic manner. Part four will provide the methodological grounding for Komonchak’s insistence that ecclesiology ought to begin with and focus on the theology of the local church. Methodologically, this chapter will set up foundations for Komonchak’s theology of the local church.

Chapter five will examine Komonchak’s theology of the local church. The first part of the chapter will present Komonchak’s understanding of Vatican II’s treatment of the local church. This will be followed by a discussion of Komonchak’s reception and further
advancement of the council’s theology of the local church. The focus will be on three issues: (1) the significance of locality for the theology of the local church, (2) the meaning of catholicity, and (3) the relationship of the local and universal church.

Chapter six will draw some conclusions about the importance of Komonchak’s work and will provide a critical assessment of his ecclesiology, focusing in particular on the foundations of his ecclesiology and on the theology of the local church. Komonchak’s contribution to the theology of the local church will be assessed in light of Lumen gentium and vis-à-vis the contributions of the three theologians presented in chapter two. The evaluation will follow a two-fold structure. It will consist of two sections: one will focus on Komonchak’s foundations in ecclesiology and the other on his theology of the local church. Each section will discuss Komonchak’s contribution and its significance. This will be followed by a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of Komonchak’s ecclesiological project.
CHAPTER 1

Joseph A. Komonchak: Biography and Major Influences on his Thought

1.1. BIOGRAPHY

Joseph A. Komonchak has been for decades one of the leading Catholic voices in the United States in the area of ecclesiology. He is a priest of the Archdiocese of New York ordained in Rome on December 18, 1963. Born on March 13, 1939 in Nyack, New York, Komonchak’s theological formation began at St. Joseph’s Seminary, in Yonkers, New York where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in 1960. He was then sent to the North American College in Rome to continue his theological studies at the Gregorian University where he earned a Licentiate in Sacred Theology in 1964. After returning from Rome, Komonchak began his teaching career. From 1964 to 1967 he was a theology instructor at the College of New Rochelle in New Rochelle, New York and served as a curate at St. Bartholomew’s Church. In 1967 Komonchak was appointed to the faculty of St. Joseph’s Seminary and remained there until 1977 as an assistant professor of systematic theology. During the majority of this time (1970–1977) he also served as chaplain to the Ursuline community at the College of New Rochelle. While on the faculty at St. Joseph’s, Komonchak continued in his studies at the Union Theological Seminary in New York where he first earned a Master’s in Theology (1969) and then a doctorate (Ph.D., 1976).¹ In 1977 Komonchak joined the faculty at the Department of Religion and Religious Education at the Catholic University of America where, from 1996 until his retirement

in 2009, he held the John and Gertrude Hubbard Chair of Religious Studies. During the forty-five years of nearly full-time teaching, Komonchak also taught at Princeton Theological Seminary, University of Notre Dame, Boston College, and Yale University.

In his teaching and writing Komonchak has concentrated on ecclesiology, history and theology of Vatican II, the thought of John Henry Newman and John Courtney Murray, and modern theology. His publications consist mostly of articles/essays and book chapters—over one hundred and fifty in total. Komonchak also published one monograph, one collection of essays, and edited seven books. A chronological look at his bibliography reveals something about the issues that occupied his interest during nearly fifty years of research and writing. Prior to the 1980s Komonchak addressed various topics such as the authority of ecclesial magisterium, theology of liberation, ministry in the church, and the church and the world. During the 1980s Komonchak’s focus became concentrated on the foundational issues in ecclesiology, and he also began to apply his insights to the theology of the local church. The core of his vision in these areas comes from this period. From the beginning of the 1990s his focus expanded to include the history and theology of Vatican II and the accompanying issues. He participated in the massive project of the five-volume History of Vatican II of which he was the English-language editor.

Komonchak belongs to the generation of theologians who witnessed a shift in Catholic theology. While they were trained entirely or in part in the neo-scholastic tradition and its

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manuals, their theological careers as teachers and scholars began to unfold in a different context, one ushered in by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965).\textsuperscript{5} Neo-scholasticism was in many ways challenged at Vatican II which on a number of issues bypassed the neo-scholastic tradition and followed instead the insights of the theologians of the \textit{ressourcement}.\textsuperscript{6} Komonchak’s generation was given a task to join forces with the theologians whose work made the council possible—a good number of whom were his generation’s teachers—to be the pioneers of the council’s reception and the renewal it called for.

1.2. \textbf{Major Influences on Komonchak’s Thought}

I will begin this section with a short remark on Komonchak’s dissertation. It is a historical study on John Henry Newman’s discovery of the visible church.\textsuperscript{7} In it, Komonchak “trace[s] the development of John Henry Newman’s view of the church from the time of his Evangelical conversion in 1816 to the eve of his first public manifestation of High Church views in 1828.”\textsuperscript{8} The result of Komonchak’s study is an analysis of three main stages in the development of Newman’s conception of the church:

(1) an Evangelical phase, from Newman’s conversion in 1816 through the better part of his first year in the ministry (1824–25); (2) a period of transition, from the summer of 1825 to the end of 1826; (3) a time of “systematizing,” from the beginning of 1827 through the summer of 1828.\textsuperscript{9}

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5. Komonchak was a student in Rome during the first three sessions of Vatican II.

6. \textit{Ressourcement} (Fr., “return to the sources”) refers to the work of Catholic theologians in the first half of the twentieth century, mainly in the area of Scripture, historical theology, and liturgy, who recovered the great classics of the patristic and medieval tradition. Their work paved the road for the Second Vatican Council.


8. Ibid., viii.

9. Ibid., 347.
From my reading of Komonchak I have not detected any influence of this study on his ecclesiological project. It is probably because the distinction between the visible and the invisible church has never been regarded as genuine in Catholic ecclesiology. Komonchak did keep his interest in Newman, however, publishing several articles, directing some dissertations dealing with his thought, and reviewing the work of others.

The first significant influence on Komonchak’s ecclesiology which I want to discuss is the Second Vatican Council. As mentioned above, Komonchak’s theological formation took place in the style of neo-scholastic manuals, but his career as teacher and scholar began to unfold in an atmosphere marked by Vatican II. The council’s ecclesiology has been the starting point of Komonchak’s reflections on the church. For Komonchak, the council reconfigured the landscape of Catholic ecclesiology. The articulation in Lumen gentium 8 of the church’s two dimensions—divine and human—has been the catalyst for Komonchak’s reflections on method in ecclesiology. As I will show in chapter five, Komonchak considers Vatican II’s theology of the local church nothing less than a Copernican revolution in ecclesiology for reconfiguring the understanding of the universal church and its relation to local churches.


Komonchak was also influenced significantly by several American Protestant theologians who wrote on the church: Claude Welch, James Gustafson, and John Knox. I will show in chapter four that their writings helped Komonchak grasp most clearly what in his view is the central problem for ecclesiology, namely, how to conceive the church as one reality composed of two dimensions—divine and human—and how to reconcile the lofty theological language about the church on the one hand, and the reality of the concrete communities of believers one knows from one’s experience, on the other. Komonchak found the work of these theologians of value because it helped him address a shift in the post-conciliar Catholic ecclesiology. In reaction to the excessive focus of pre-conciliar ecclesiology on the church’s institutional elements and following the lead of the council’s ecclesiological vision, many ecclesiologists began to emphasize theological views of the church. Komonchak has not considered this shift a happy move in all respects because there was a neglect of the connection between such views of the church and the concrete communities of believers. In addition, there was a tendency for theological reductionism. The importance of Welch, Gustafson, and Knox for Komonchak has been in articulating the reality of the church as a human and social reality while avoiding the pitfalls of sociological reductionism.

The single individual who exerted the most significant intellectual influence on Komonchak’s ecclesiological project has been the Canadian Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan (1904–1984). Lonergan was Komonchak’s teacher at the Gregorian University and later a fellow colleague in the academy. Lonergan was not an ecclesiologist and never produced a theological study specifically on the church. He is known mostly for his work on the theory of human
understanding$^{13}$ and on method in theology,$^{14}$ though he also wrote extensively in Latin in the area of Christology and Trinitarian theology.$^{15}$ In chapter four I will discuss how his reading of Lonergan led Komonchak to conceive the object, foundations, and the goal of ecclesiology. From Lonergan Komonchak appropriated the distinction between common sense and theory which he applied to his conception of ecclesiology as a critical systematic theological discipline. Lonergan’s theology of conversion was also instrumental for Komonchak’s conception of a methodological shift in ecclesiology, that is, of re-envisioning the church in terms of the human community marked by transformed intersubjectivity. Komonchak’s insistence that ecclesiologists engage social sciences also has its roots in Lonergan. Lastly, Komonchak owes to Lonergan his view of the church as a community of common meaning and value, as a process of self-constitution, and the connection he makes between the church and redemption.

Finally, Komonchak was also influenced in a significant way by the work of various social scientists, in particular by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Komonchak draws a parallel between their view of society as a human and social product and between the church as a human, social and ecclesial product. The church understood in this way, existing as communities of believers, is also the locus of the transcendent, divine. The notions of

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“intersubjectivity” and “reification” Komonchak also appropriated from Berger and Luckmann. They became crucial for his articulation of the church’s ontology and its genesis. As we will see throughout this study, Komonchak came to the conclusion that one cannot construct a theology of the church adequately without an engagement with social sciences. His insistence that one can apply social theory fruitfully to ecclesiology without falling into sociological reductionism is one of the trademarks of his method in ecclesiology.
CHAPTER 2
Theology of the Local Church: Vatican II and Beyond

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) was an event of immense importance for Catholic theology. The council addressed numerous issues—divine revelation, reform of the liturgy, religious freedom—but its focal point was ecclesiology. While teaching in continuity with the church’s tradition, the council provided an ecclesiology which, on the whole, followed the direction of the so-called nouvelle théologie,¹ rather than the neo-scholastic ecclesiological manuals dominant at the time. The chief ecclesiological achievement of Vatican II is its “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” Lumen gentium. Without abandoning the principles hitherto operative in Catholic ecclesiologies, Lumen gentium recovered some neglected ecclesiological themes, especially from the first millennium of Christian history. An understanding of the church as a mystery or sacrament and not primarily as an institution or an organization, and the view that the church is the whole People of God are just two examples of those recovered themes. Another one, which is directly related to this study, is the recovery of an ancient theology of the local or particular church.

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¹ Nouvelle théologie (Fr., “new theology”) was a theological movement among the Catholic theologians mainly from France in the first half of the twentieth century which wanted to overcome the limitations of neo-scholastic theology. Among its most prominent representatives were Marie-Dominique Chenu, Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar, Jean Daniélou, and Henri Bouillard. One of the chief characteristics of this so-called “new theology”—a name given to it by its opponents and originally having a pejorative connotation—was a work of ressourcement, that is, a return to biblical, patristic, and medieval theological sources. The movement also advocated a dialogue with the contemporary world, incorporated experience into theology, and studied the development of dogma. Pius XII’s encyclical Humani Generis (1950) was critical of nouvelle théologie and was expected to end it. Although a number of the proponents of the “new theology” were disciplined at the time, many of their views were eventually espoused at the Second Vatican Council where they were some of the most influential periti (theological experts).
The New Testament speaks of “the church” and of “the churches” without the qualifying adjectives such as “local,” “particular,” “whole,” or “universal.” What the church is has been understood differently throughout Christian history, but it is possible to recognize two basic orientations. The first, documented since the second century and dominant in the first millennium, envisions the church as a communion of local churches. The second, dominant in the West in the second millennium, envisions the church as a universal entity with its center in the see of Rome. It has a tendency to view other churches as extensions of the local Church of Rome.

This latter view had its origin in the Gregorian Reforms in the eleventh century, but became dominant only in the aftermath of the Council of Trent (1545–1563) and then especially after the First Vatican Council (1869–1870). During this period concepts such as *societas inegalium, hierarchica*, and *societas perfecta* began to be used by ecclesiologists and canonists to refer to the church. In these ecclesiological perspectives the local church was not considered fully church because it lacked the fullness of jurisdictional power, even though it enjoyed the fullness of sacramental life. After the First Vatican Council many theologians treated local churches in effect as “branch offices” of the universal church. The Second Vatican Council

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retrieved some elements of the theology of the local church dominant during the first millennium.

This chapter will consist of three parts. First, by outlining the retrieval of the concept of the local church in the decades prior to the Second Vatican Council, I will situate Vatican II’s treatment of the local church within a larger context of the theological renewal in the first half of the twentieth century. I will then proceed to examine the documents of Vatican II and their treatment of the local church. In the third part I will present some of the trajectories the theology of the local church took in the work of theologians after the council. This I will illustrate by outlining the main characteristics of the theologies of the local church of Leonardo Boff, Joseph Ratzinger, and Jean-Marie Roger Tillard, who developed their ecclesiology after the council, and who furthered the council’s reception of the theology of the local church.

From a methodological standpoint, this chapter will situate Joseph A. Komonchak’s theology of the local church in the post-Vatican II ecclesiological scene, and, at the same time, it will serve as a point of reference for the last section of this project in which I will evaluate Komonchak’s thought vis-à-vis the conciliar documents and other theologians. This chapter will be mainly historical and expository, and to a lesser degree also analytical. Further analysis and evaluation of the contents of this chapter will take place at the end of this study in conjunction with the analysis and evaluation of Komonchak’s work.

2.1. YVES CONGAR: A PRECURSOR TO VATICAN II’S THEOLOGY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

The rediscovery of the local church at Vatican II was not accidental, but rather a consequence of the recovery of the ancient consciousness of the church, in particular, the
connection between the Eucharist and the church.⁵ At the start of the renewal in Catholic ecclesiology which culminated at the Second Vatican Council stands the nineteenth-century Tübingen scholar Johann Adam Möhler (1796–1838). Möhler did not develop a theology of the local church, but his patristic understanding of the ministry of the bishop and of catholicity prepared the ground for it. In his 1825 treatise *Unity in the Church*⁶ Möhler articulated an ecclesiology with strong pneumatological foundations, recovering the role of the Holy Spirit in the church. In contrast to ecclesiological reflections at the time, which had the exposition of the church’s juridical and structural aspects as their point of departure, Möhler’s ecclesiology began with reflections on the role of the Holy Spirit which he considered the dynamic principle underlying ecclesial structures. Möhler did not, however, relativize or negate the importance of the visible ecclesial structures (i.e., episcopacy, papacy). He affirmed their validity and necessity. Although his Spirit-centered ecclesiology did not find much following at his time, it became a major influence on the ecclesiology of Yves Congar.

Central to *Unity in the Church* is Möhler’s conception of the church as a dynamic organism which journeys through history, growing and developing over time like other living organisms. For Möhler the genuine growth and development of the church did not oppose the church’s unity or catholicity which he understood in organic terms, that is, incorporating diversity into a unity. Möhler’s understanding of catholicity thus went beyond geographic universality. He considered the Eucharist as the highest expression of the church’s unity. He

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found the image of the church as the Body of Christ to be the most adequate description of the church’s deepest reality, according to which the church is an organism whose inner unity is expressed externally in the church’s life and structures.

In *Symbolism*, his second major work on ecclesiology, Möhler shifted from the pneumatological to an incarnational approach to ecclesiology. Following the model of the Christological doctrine of the hypostatic union, he articulated an understanding of the church as one reality, as a union of distinct elements: human and divine. He began to envision the church as a continual incarnation, “as the expansion to all human beings at all times in all places of that divine-human relation established in Christ.” Möhler’s view of the church as a continual incarnation had a strong impact on the theologians of the so-called Roman school, who taught at the Gregorian University in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

González de Cardenal considers Dom Adrien Gréa (1820–1917) the nineteenth century “pioneer of the theology of the local church.” His theology of the local church was centered on the Eucharist and on the bishop. He offered a framework in which the bishop appeared as head of a local church. In fact, he treated local churches before he treated the universal church. Gréa’s work, however, did not leave a significant imprint in his time which was dominated by


the universalistic ecclesiology. It was only in the first half of the twentieth century with theologians of the *ressourcement* such as Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac that the theology of the local church began to receive significant attention.

Yves Congar (1904–1995) undoubtedly belongs among the most prominent Catholic ecclesiologists. His importance for twentieth-century Catholic theology can hardly be overestimated. Richard McBrien calls him “the greatest ecclesiologist in the history of the Church.” Dennis Doyle speaks of him as “one of the great figures whose work led up to Vatican II,” and Joseph Komonchak said of Congar, “there is no theologian who did more to prepare for Vatican II or had a larger role in the orientation and even in the composition of the documents.”

From the start of his theological career, Congar was deeply engaged in recovering and gathering the primary sources of the Christian tradition. He immersed himself in the biblical, patristic, and medieval sources of theology. Through this work of *ressourcement* Congar wanted to “reclaim for ecclesiology the experience of the first millennium.” At Le Saulchoir under the guidance of M.-D. Chenu, O.P., Congar was introduced to the work of Möhler, who became for

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Congar an inspiration and the most important source in his approach to ecclesiology.\textsuperscript{18} John Markey notes that as in the case of Möhler, Congar’s aspiration was to “develop a vision of the Church that was more vital, synthetic, communal and pneumatologically based.”\textsuperscript{19} Markey further observes, however, that unlike Möhler and most theologians of his day Congar also recognized the need for an ecclesiology which would not only include other Christian denominations but also understand “the realism of grace and the Word in cultures and peoples in general.”\textsuperscript{20}

Congar’s contribution to ecclesiology is immense. It includes: (1) highlighting the connection between the church and the Trinity and understanding the church as communion, (2) groundbreaking work in the areas of church reform, the laity and ecumenism, and (3) the theology of the church’s missionary activity. I will limit my discussion of Congar here to his contribution to the theology of the local church prior to the Second Vatican Council. Although the theology of the local church was never at the center of his thought, and his contribution in this area is not as systematic and comprehensive as it is on the laity, church reform, ecumenism, or missionary activity, Congar produced a few studies dedicated to this topic.\textsuperscript{21} My goal is to

\textsuperscript{18} Cf. Thomas F. O’Meara, “Revelation and History: Schelling, Möhler and Congar,” The Irish Theological Quarterly 53, no. 1 (1987): 17–35, at 29. Le Saulchoir was a renowned study center of the French Dominicans. It was established in 1903 in Belgium when religious orders were expelled from France. In 1939 it was transferred to Étiolles, near Paris, and in 1971 to Paris. Its teaching functions ceased in 1974.


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.

highlight those elements of Congar’s theology of the local church which influenced the documents of Vatican II.

Before I delineate the main traits of Congar’s theology of the local church, it should be noted that in this area the most important theologically formative influences on Congar were Russian theologians who immigrated to France after the Russian Revolution of 1917. Congar got to know them in the Russian seminary run by the Dominicans at Lille, and also at the Institute of Saint-Serge in Paris. Through his contacts with them Congar noticed that while for Roman Catholics the word “church” suggests first a universal reality, a great institution to which people are added in baptism, for the Orthodox, the word “church” evokes first a concrete community. In addition, through their influence Congar gained insights into eucharistic ecclesiology and the eucharistic nature of the church. But Congar was also critical of some aspects of Orthodox theology. As Timothy MacDonald explains, Congar was “critical of the entire Slavophile movement of Khomiakov in particular for their lack of social awareness, their aversion to church action in society, their attitude to the role of the hierarchy and to their understanding of the role of the pope.”

What is referred to as “eucharistic ecclesiology” originated with the nineteenth century Russian thinker Alexei Khomiakov (1804–1860), who is considered the founder of modern

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24. Ibid., 31.
Orthodox theology. This ecclesiology came to be associated with Nicholas Afanasiev (1893–1966), who probably coined the term, and with his students John Meyendorff (1926–1992) and Alexander Schmemann (1921–1983). Grounded in the patristic insistence that the church is fundamentally eucharistic and reacting against what he called “universal ecclesiology,” Afanasiev made an identification between church, Eucharist, and the local church. For Afanasiev, wherever the Eucharist is celebrated by a bishop, there is the whole church. Thus, the Eucharist and the church are coextensive. Afanasiev’s version of the eucharistic ecclesiology “rejects in an incisive manner any understanding of the local church as a fragment of the Catholic Church which would be anterior, exterior, or superior to it.”

The first element of Congar’s theology of the local church which deserves attention for its impact on the documents of Vatican II is the link between the Eucharist and the church. Here one can clearly recognize the influence on Congar of the Orthodox theologians such as Afanasiev and Paul Evdokimov. Congar accepts their view that the universal church exists perfectly in a local church since in the celebration of the Eucharist the fullness of the church’s mystery is realized because Christ gives himself without reservation. Congar notes that for the


26. See ibid. McPartlan explains that, for Afanasiev, “universal ecclesiology” saw the church united by the bishops, and was modeled on the juridical structure of the Roman Empire. Afanasiev identified Cyprian as the one with whom it originated. In this ecclesiology the Eucharist plays no part in church unity, which is totally juridical.


Orthodox, “the universal church is a communion of local eucharistic communities, each one presided over by its bishop.” He acknowledges that “there is something incontestable in these ecclesiological views and it is good to recognize this without reserve in fidelity to our own tradition.”

He further notes:

In the first place, the whole church in the eyes of Catholic theologians is not constituted by the addition or the material sum of particular churches. From the point of view of the spiritual goods of salvation, each local community gathered around its bishop is “the church of God insofar as it is (here or there).”

Congar explains that for Aquinas, a representative par excellence of the Western theological tradition, the Eucharist “contains indeed the entire mystery of our salvation. It is like the consummation of the spiritual life. Its res, that is to say the spiritual fruit pursued and procured, is the unity of the Mystical Body.” One can see that Congar tries to demonstrate that the close connection between the Eucharist and the church, which is so characteristic of the Orthodox tradition, has not been absent from Catholic ecclesiology. He was critical, however, of Afanasiev’s extreme affirmation of the connection between the Eucharist and the local church because it left no room for common and more extensive authorities than the authority of the local bishop. In particular, it left no opening for the role of the pope.

29. “L’Église universelle est la communion de communautés eucharistiques locales présidées chacune par son évêque.” Ibid.


31. “In premier lieu, l’Église totale, aux yeux des théologiens catholiques, n’est pas constituée par l’addition ou la somme matérielle des Églises particulières. Au point de vue des biens spirituels du salut, chaque communauté locale groupée autour de son évêque est « l’Église de Dieu pour autant qu’elle est (ici ou là)». Ibid., 251–52.

32. “contient en effet tout le mystère de notre salut ; elle est comme la consommation de la vie spirituelle. Sa res, c’est-à-dire le fruit spirituel visé et, de soi, procuré par le sacrement, est l’unité du Corps mystique.” Ibid., 252.

Congar’s understanding of catholicity is another element of his ecclesiology which deserves attention for its impact on the council’s theology of the local church. In his conception of catholicity Congar tried to incorporate Eastern and Western views. The former is referred as *qualitative* for placing the emphasis on the notion of catholicity as the fullness of God’s gifts to the church. It is capable of incorporating unity and diversity. The latter is referred to as *quantitative* for viewing catholicity as the church’s geographical extension throughout the whole world. This view has a difficulty in integrating unity and diversity and tends to promote uniformity. While Congar tries to integrate these two views, it seems that, at least in his writings prior to Vatican II, he conceived catholicity not as unity expressed in diversity but rather as unity transcending diversity. He writes:

Catholicity is the universal capacity for unity, or the dynamic universality of the Church’s principles of unity. Consequently, though unity is given straight away, catholicity, being its universality, is something potential, not, indeed, in the sense that it is quite indeterminate and could become this thing or that, but in the sense that such a property, however definite in itself, is not expressed forthwith; that is why we speak of dynamic universality. This indicates, too, the capacity inherent in the Church’s principles of unity—the grace of Christ, the baptismal character, the apostolic faith, sacramental charity, community life in unity—to assimilate, fill, win over to God, reunite and bring to perfection in Christ, the whole man and all men, all human values. Such a capacity implies that every human value, while retaining its own specific character, can be “recapitulated” in Christ, that is to say revivified by his spirit . . . and taken up into the unit of his Body, which is the Church.\(^\text{34}\)

Congar doubts that one has grasped his understanding of catholicity unless it has been understood as taking into unity those realities which at first were considered or, at least, seemed alien to it. In his view, “the Church [constantly] adopts or takes to itself, in the course of

\(^{34}\) Yves Congar, *The Mystery of the Church*, trans. A. V. Littledale (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1960), 142–43 [This book consists of: *La Pentecôte* (Chartres: Cerf, 1956) and *Esquisses du mystère de l’Église* (1941; Paris: Cerf, 1953). The quoted text is from *Esquisses*]. The notion of “recapitulation” in Christ is found in *Lumen gentium* 13, one of the most important statements of Vatican II on catholicity. See p. 41.
experience, things one would not have thought capable of being assimilated to its unity.”\textsuperscript{35} One can see from these words that Congar has not yet reached the understanding of catholicity as unity-in-diversity. One has the impression that unity transcends and precedes diversity. In the end, diversity is \textit{assimilated} into unity and, in a way, diversity is overcome.

In spite of the strong influence of the Orthodox tradition and its emphasis on locality, Congar’s ecclesiology prior to the council remained primarily universalistic. The prime example of this is his understanding of the relationship between the local and the universal church. For Congar, the universal church precedes the local church. One can detect an unresolved tension in Congar on this subject. On the one hand, in his reflections on the Eucharist, the bishop, and the church, he affirms the full ecclesial reality of the local church,\textsuperscript{36} which should imply that the universal church does not contain more of “church” than a local church does. Yet, Congar also argues that local churches are secondary to the universal church when he makes statements such as these:

\begin{quote}
The church is not composed essentially of local communities. There is certainly a sense in which one could say that, but in my opinion, this is not the decisive sense. In a decisive way, the church is not composed of local communities. The church is composed of persons who are converted and incorporated into this transcendent church. . . . Saint Paul always speaks in those terms. For him, each believer is incorporated into the universal, transcendent church. . . . a believer is by his or her baptism incorporated into the universal church—not into a parish as such—but, being incorporated into the universal church, he or she is in a second moment a member of such a parish, because he is a resident of such and such place; he or she is by birth determined according to his or her geographical coordinates.

. . . The faithful are incorporated directly into the universal church. Then in a second moment, having been incorporated into the universal church, they form part of a local
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 143.

\textsuperscript{36} See supra note 31.
church and they constitute a local church . . . These local churches, if they deserve the name local churches, represent the whole mystery of the church.\textsuperscript{37}

He also says:

There is a sense . . . in which the church is made up of its members, and another in which the church makes its members and is anterior to them. . . . The church anticipates itself in yet another way, namely, \textit{as institution}. This signifies the reality of the church by which it \textit{precedes} its own members not only in Christ but also in its own existence in this world . . . \textsuperscript{38}

In addition to illustrating the priority of the universal church over the local churches, one also gets the impression from these statements that for Congar the (universal) church is a reality existing apart from the local churches.

Congar’s lack of appreciation for “locality” and his understanding of faith, as the following statement will illustrate, may play a key role in his understanding of the relationship of the local and universal church. He says:

The most decisive attributes of the church are transcendent in respect to what is visible, earthly, particularizing: matter, space, time. It is a question of entering into an alliance with God, entering into the Christian mystery: that in itself is not localized. Faith in a completely decisive first moment removes us from the world and from the categories of the terrestrial world. In a second moment, faith puts us back there but under different conditions. Faith puts us there by giving us the world as a task of God, as a domain of the Father. This changes the perspective. Fundamentally, Christian life would be a conversion from a “being in a world through a completely carnal body” to a “being in a

\textsuperscript{37} “L’Église n’est pas faite essentiellement de communautés locales. Il y a certes un sens où l’on peut le dire, mais, à mon avis, ce n’est pas le sens décisif. D’une façon décisive, l’Église n’est faite de communautés locales. L’Église est faite de personnes qui se convertissent et s’incorporent à cette Église transcendante . . . . Saint Paul parle toujours en ces termes. Pour lui, chaque fidèle est incorporé à l’Église universelle, transcendante. . . . un fidèle est, par son bapteme, incorporé à l’Église universelle—pas à une paroisse comme telle—mais, étant incorporé à l’Église universelle, il est, en un second moment, membre de telle ou telle paroisse, parce qu’il est résident en tel ou tel lieu ; il est, par sa naissance, déterminé selon telle ou telle coordonnée géographique.


world which starts from God and Jesus Christ,” in brief, to an *engagement* which would be spiritual. Thus in a first moment earthly categories are not taken into account.\(^{39}\)

It seems that Congar is not only distinguishing between the transcendent and the immanent, universal and local, but also separating them, privileging the former over the latter. Within this understanding the universal must precede the particular/local.

By way of summary, Congar’s theology of the local church anticipates the council on several points. First, it links the Eucharist, the bishop, and the church, affiriming the full ecclesial reality of the local church. Second, it expands the notion of catholicity, incorporating diversity into unity, though not arriving at the notion of catholicity as unity-in-diversity, as the council will. Third, it attempts to reconcile the universal and local dimensions of the church but is not able to part with the universalistic ecclesiological framework. As we will see, the documents of Vatican II also unfold primarily within the universalistic ecclesiological framework. As the for relationship between the local and the universal church, there is only one statement in the documents of Vatican II, in fact one word, a preposition (*ex*), which suggests explicitly the simultaneity between the local and the universal church.

### 2.2 VATICAN II AND THE THEOLOGY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

In spite of its many ecclesiological accomplishments, the Second Vatican Council did not provide a fully coherent ecclesiology. This should not be surprising, however. As Richard

Gaillardetz noted, “[i]t is unrealistic to expect that a council in which between two and three thousand bishops and numerous other theologians played some part would be able to construct a rigorously systematic theology of the church.”\textsuperscript{40} After the council was over, some argued that the lack of coherence was a result of juxtaposing of two different ecclesiological—one juridical and the other centered on communion.\textsuperscript{41} Others added that it was due to the search for consensus through formulations based on compromises.\textsuperscript{42} No matter how one accounts for the lack of the full coherence in the council’s ecclesiology, the task of constructing a systematic ecclesiology based on Vatican II’s ecclesiological vision was left to theologians. In the years following the council they began to interpret, develop, and advance the insights of the council. The renewed emphasis on the church as communion, on the local church as the realization of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, a dialogical stance toward the world, and an openness to ecumenism were at the center of ecclesiological projects.

The rediscovery of the local church is considered one of Vatican II’s major accomplishments. Yet, this could be seen as an overstatement given that the council’s treatment of the local church often lacks focus and is marked by ambiguities. The lack of focus is mainly a matter of methodology. One of the main methodological problems of Vatican II’s theology of the local church is that the council’s ecclesiology for the most part unfolds within a universalistic ecclesiological framework characteristic of the Roman Catholic ecclesiology in the second

\textsuperscript{40} Richard R. Gaillardetz, \textit{The Church in the Making: Lumen Gentium, Christus Dominus, Orientalium Ecclesiaram} (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), xvi.


millennium, especially after the Reformation. Its starting point is the whole or universal church rather than a local community centered on the bishop and the Eucharist. In this framework bishops are first of all members of the episcopal college whose head is the pope. They have supreme authority over the whole church. Within this framework the local church can play only a minor role, if any at all.\footnote{43. Cf. Gaillardetz, \textit{The Church in the Making}, 78–79.}

Another methodological drawback is that the theology of the local church did not play a major role in the genesis of the Vatican II documents. As González de Cardenal observes, the key conciliar teachings about the local church as the real presence of the universal church “developed at the margins of general redaction of \textit{Lumen gentium}.”\footnote{44. González de Cardenal, “Development of a Theology of the Local Church,” 42.} This is another reason why the council’s treatment of the local church lacks focus. Only a few passages of the council’s documents treat the local church explicitly. For the most part, Vatican II’s theology of the local church emerges when the council treats such themes as episcopacy, catholicity of the church, and the relationship of the local and universal church. In the end, one is left with no more than a few basic principles that can serve as spring-boards for ecclesiologists to construct a more robust and coherent theology of the local church.

This section of the present chapter will discuss Vatican II’s theology of the local church. I will use a combination of a thematic and a chronological approach. I will present the council’s treatment of the local church by discussing the themes within which it is either implied or treated explicitly. Specific texts will be presented in the chronological order of promulgation. The council developed its ecclesiology in stages. Its foundations were initially articulated in the very
first document the council promulgated, the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963). The council’s doctrine of the church was then laid out most thoroughly in the “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” *Lumen gentium* (1964) and in the “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” *Gaudium et spes* (1965). Some themes from *Lumen gentium* such as episcopacy, ecumenism, and catholicity received additional, and one could say in some respects more refined treatment, in the council’s decrees such as the “Decree on the Pastoral Office of the Bishops in the Church,” *Christus Dominus* (1964), the “Decree on Ecumenism,” *Unitatis redintegratio* (1965), and the “Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity,” *Ad gentes divinitus* (1965) respectively.

Before I proceed further with the treatment of the theology of the local church at Vatican II, it needs to be noted that the council was not consistent in its use of the terms “particular” and “local” with regard to church. Generally, the term “particular church” refers to a diocese. Several times, however, it designates a grouping of dioceses such as patriarchates, which are in union with the pope, but have their own discipline, liturgical customs, and theological and

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46. Cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 13b, 111b; *Lumen gentium* 23a (3x), 27a, 45b; *Christus Dominus* 3b, 11a, b, 23e, 28a, 36a; *Ad gentes* 6c, d, 20a, g.
spiritual heritage. The term “local church” is used less often. In a few passages it too
designates a diocese. On one occasion it refers to patriarchates. On two occasions local
congregations gathered for the Eucharist are also called “churches.” Lastly, in one passage the
terms “particular” and “local” are used at the same time, without a distinction, referring to
Eastern-rite churches.

After the council theologians tried to clarify this terminological inconsistency but they
did not reach consensus. The discussion focused on which term should be used of the churches
that exist on the infra-universal level. One of the most important attempts in this regard is that of
Henri de Lubac. He argued that based on Vatican II documents when one wants to define the
church theologically, the term “particular church” should be used, and that this term should be
reserved for a diocese. According to de Lubac, only spiritual and hierarchical considerations
enter into the definition of the particular church. He says:

> Although she always exists in a given place and brings together men attracted by all sorts
> of human interests, the particular church is not therefore determined as such by
topography or by any other factor whether of the natural order or of the human order.
She is determined by “the mystery of faith.” We would say, in a word, that her criterion
is of an essentially theological order.

In de Lubac’s view, the term “local church” can also be used to define a church, not
theologically however, but in terms of various socio-cultural factors. His conclusion is that only

47. Cf. Lumen gentium 13b; Orientalium ecclesiæarum 2, 3, 4 (2x), 10, 16, 17, 19 (2x); Ad gentes 22b.
48. Cf. Ad gentes 19d, 27a, 32d.
49. Cf. Lumen gentium 23d.
50. Cf. Lumen gentium 26a, 28d.
52. See de Lubac, The Motherhood of the Church, 171–213.
the particular church “belongs to the fundamental structure of the universal church (the latter being realized only in the former); but the local church, with her singular traits, is nonetheless something useful, or even indispensable *ad bonum Ecclesiae.*”  

De Lubac’s position, however, has not acquired a broad acceptance among ecclesiologists. Some have argued in the opposite fashion to use the term “local church” over “particular church.” For instance, Gilles Routhier has argued that the term “local church” should be used when referring to the church on the infra-universal level. For him this term better expresses the church’s mission and catholicity while avoiding the shortcomings of “particular church.” Key to Routhier’s position is his evaluation of locality as not merely a socio-cultural, but rather a theological category. As a consequence of the lack of consensus on this matter, many ecclesiologists use “local church” and “particular church” interchangeably. I will return to this issue in the beginning of chapter five when discussing Komonchak’s view on this matter.

A. Bishop, Eucharist, and the Church

The topic of the local church initially emerges in the documents of Vatican II in the course of a reflection on the relationship among the bishop, the Eucharist, and the church. This takes place in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the very first document promulgated by the council, where several texts express a connection among the bishop, the Eucharist, and the church. In *Sacrosanctum Concilium* this is most aptly expressed in article 41 which states:

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54. Ibid., 210.

55. See Gilles Routhier, ““Église locale’ ou ‘Église particulière,’” 277–334; see also Legrand, “La réalisation de l’Église en un lieu,” 151–59

The bishop is to be considered as the High Priest of his flock from whom the life in Christ of his faithful is in some way derived and upon whom it in some way depends. Therefore all should hold in the greatest esteem the liturgical life of the diocese centered around the bishop, especially in his cathedral church. They must be convinced that the principal manifestation of the Church consists in the full, active participation of all God’s holy people in the same liturgical celebrations, especially in the same Eucharist, in one prayer, at one altar, at which the bishop presides, surrounded by his college of priests and by his ministers.57

*Lumen gentium*, which chronologically follows *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, also makes a connection between the Eucharist and the church. In article 7 we read:

Really sharing in the body of the Lord in the breaking of the Eucharistic bread, we are taken up into communion with him and with one another. “Because the bread is one, we, though many, are one body, all of us who partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:17). In this way all of us are made members of his body (cf. 1 Cor. 12:27), “but severally members one of another” (Rom. 12:4).

The strongest articulation of the connection among the bishop, the Eucharist, and the church, is in *Lumen gentium* 26, which amounts to nothing less than a *magna charta* of the theology of the local church. It states:

The bishop, invested with the fullness of the sacrament of Orders, is “the steward of the grace of the supreme priesthood,” above all in the Eucharist, which he himself offers, or ensures that it is offered, from which the Church ever derives its life and on which it thrives. This Church of Christ is really present in all legitimately organized local groups of the faithful, which, insofar as they are united to their pastors, are also quite appropriately called Churches in the New Testament.58

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58. Episcopus, plenitudine sacramenti ordinis insignitus, est “oeconomus gratiae supremi sacerdotii,” praesertim in eucharistia, qua ipse offert vel offerri curat, et qua continuo vivit et crescit ecclesia. Haec Christi ecclesia vere adest in omnibus, legitimis fidelium congregationibus localibus, quae, pastoribus suis adhaerentes, et ipsae in novo testamento ecclesiae vocantur. The text in the quotation marks is from a prayer of episcopal consecration in the Byzantine rite: *Euchologion to mega*, (Rome 1873), 139.
This last sentence, which appears rather abruptly, is an interpolation prompted by a speech delivered by the Auxiliary Bishop of Fulda, Edward Schick.\textsuperscript{59} It makes two important assertions: (a) that the local church is a real presence of the universal church, and (b) that the word “church” refers to a concrete community of Christians. The former assertion is then explained:

In [the local groups of the faithful] the faithful are gathered together through the preaching of the Gospel of Christ, and the mystery of the Lord’s Supper is celebrated . . . In each altar community, under the sacred ministry of the bishop, a manifest symbol is to be seen of the charity and “unity of the mystical body, without which there can be no salvation.” In these communities, though they may often be small and poor, or existing in the diaspora, Christ is present through whose power and influence the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church is constituted.\textsuperscript{60}

In addition to the two assertions already mentioned, the importance of \textit{Lumen gentium} 26 lies also in permitting one to identify the congregations of the faithful on the infra-diocesan level as local churches. \textit{A relatio} of the council’s Doctrinal Commission supports this interpretation when with regard to article 26 it says, “It is understood . . . that a particular church, especially within a diocese, whether it is a parish or it has been assembled for another reason, is nevertheless always subject to the bishop.”\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{59} The English text of the speech can be found in Hans Küng, Yves Congar, O.P., and Daniel O’Hanlon, S.J. eds., \textit{Council Speeches of Vatican II} (Glen Rock, NJ: Paulist Press, 1964), 35–38. In the first volume of his \textit{Memoirs} Hans Küng says that he prepared Bishop Schick’s speech. Küng also explains why this statement on the local church appears rather late in the document on the church. According to Küng, Charles Moeller, a council \textit{peritus} from the University of Louvain and an advisor to the council’s Theological Commission involved in drafting \textit{of Lumen gentium}, asked him where in his view the passage on the local church should be inserted. Küng allegedly suggested that it should appear as soon as possible in the Constitution, since in the New Testament the church is originally the local church. Moeller explained, however, that chapters 1 and 2 of \textit{Lumen gentium} were already finalized. Thus, the statements on the local church were placed into chapter 3. See Hans Küng, \textit{My Struggle for Freedom: Memoirs} (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 369.

\textsuperscript{60} The text in quotation marks is from Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}, III, q. 73, a. 3.

In the texts considered so far the council retrieved the integrity of the local church by recovering the ancient patristic notion that “the Eucharist makes the church.” The import of these texts for the theology of the local church is that a gathering of a local community for the celebration of the Eucharist, especially when presided over by the bishop, is not just a matter of Christ’s sacramental presence in the eucharistic species, or as one could say a matter of the church making the Eucharist. Rather it is equally a matter of Christ’s ecclesial presence in those who are gathered, who become the Body of Christ in that place. Furthermore, since Christ gives himself fully, each local eucharistic community must be fully church. It cannot be a mere subdivision of the church universal; rather it must be its local realization. This is one of the central points of Vatican II’s theology of the local church, namely that each local church contains the full theological reality of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, though it is not the whole church. It will be brought up several times in this section of the chapter.

Article 11 of the “Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops,” Christus Dominus, which is counted among the pillars of Vatican II’s theology of the local church, reflects the same understanding of the local church as Lumen gentium 26. The article states:

A diocese is a section of the People of God entrusted to a bishop to be guided by him with the assistance of his clergy so that, loyal to its pastor and formed by him into one community in the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and the Eucharist, it constitutes one particular church in which the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and active. By asserting that a diocese constitutes one particular church in which the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church of Christ is truly present and active, this article reaffirms that the local church is

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63. Diocesis est populi Dei portio, quae episcopo cum cooperatione presbyterii pascenda concreditur, ita ut, pastori suo adhaerens ab eoque per evangelium et eucharistiam in Spiritu sancto congregata, ecclesiam particularem constituat, in qua vere inest et operatur una sancta catholica et apostolica Christi ecclesia.
not merely an administrative district of the church universal. In addition, it is theologically significant that the designation “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church” is here applied to a particular church, rather than being reserved only for the church universal.

Yet the opening statement that a diocese is a section or a portion of the People of God may be seen in tension with the recognition of the full ecclesial reality of the local church since it is not clear in what sense the diocese is “populi Dei portio.” If this “portion” was understood as a part of a larger whole, then as a particular church, the diocese would not be the full realization of the universal church. Emmanuel Lanne explains, however, that the intention of the opening statement in Christus Dominus 11 was to define the diocese in canonical terms. The expression “populi Dei portio” should be understood as defining the limits of the bishop’s jurisdiction in the sense that the bishop’s direct jurisdiction is limited to that part of God’s people entrusted to him. This expression should be understood as referring to the canonical aspect of the bishop’s jurisdiction over the diocese, and not as contradicting an affirmation of the full ecclesial reality of the local church.64

B. Catholicity of the Church

Vatican II’s theology of the local church is implicit within the council’s treatment of the church’s catholicity. It was a characteristic of the pre-Vatican II ecclesiology, that catholicity was understood in terms of universality, that is, as the church’s geographical extension throughout the whole world. As Gaillardetz explains, with some exceptions such as the nineteenth century Tübingen School, “catholicity was practically collapsed into the marks of

unity and apostolicity, that is, visible union with and obedience to the apostolic see of Rome.”  

Catholicity meant uniformity which barely left any room for diversity on the level of the local churches.

Vatican II expanded the understanding of the church’s catholicity by retrieving its qualitative dimension present in the first millennium. As qualitative, catholicity refers to unity-in-diversity or to fullness-in-unity. Although the universalistic or quantitative notion of catholicity is still present in the conciliar documents, in several places the documents make a shift toward a catholicity that is qualitative in character. This is the case in the “Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy” when the council speaks with approval about particularity and diversity. In article 37 it says:

> Even in liturgy the Church does not wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters which do not involve the faith or the good of the whole community. Rather does she respect and foster the qualities and talents of the various races and nations. Anything in these people’s way of life which is not indissolubly bound up with superstition and error she studies with sympathy, and if, possible, preserves intact. She sometimes even admits such things into the liturgy itself, provided they harmonize with its true and authentic spirit.

As Josef Jungmann explains, the council here rejects a rigid uniformity manifested in the Europeanization of Catholicism and welcomes the values of other cultures.

Perhaps the most paradigmatic text which celebrates the qualitative notion of catholicity as unity-in-diversity is in *Lumen gentium* 13. There one reads:


66. It is present, for instance, in *Lumen Gentium* 13 which states: “All men are called to belong to the new People of God. This People, therefore, whilst remaining one and only one, is to be spread throughout the whole world and to all ages in order that the design of God’s will may be fulfilled.”

67. See also *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 38–40, 123.

This character of universality which adorns the People of God is a gift from the Lord himself whereby the Catholic Church ceaselessly and efficaciously seeks to recapitulate the whole of humanity and all its goods under Christ the Head in the unity of his Spirit.

In virtue of this catholicity each part contributes its own gifts to other parts and to the whole Church, so that the whole and each of the parts are strengthened by the common sharing of all things and by the common effort to attain to fullness in unity.\(^{69}\)

Catholicity here refers to the transformation and recapitulation of everything in Christ.

The qualitative notion of catholicity as unity-in-diversity is present also in the “Decree on Ecumenism.” Article 4 states:

While preserving unity in essentials, let everyone in the Church, according to the office entrusted to him, preserve a proper freedom in the various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in the variety of liturgical rites, and even in the theological elaborations of revealed truth. In all things let charity prevail. If they are true to this course of action, they will be giving ever richer expression to the authentic catholicity and apostolicity of the Church.

This text, which reads like an elaboration on the famous dictum attributed to Augustine,\(^ {70}\) rejects the understanding of catholicity as uniformity and presents it rather as multiplicity or diversity within unity.

Respect for particularity and diversity, especially that of culture, is nowhere better developed than in the “Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity,” \textit{Ad gentes}, which is the only document of Vatican II that has a chapter dedicated specifically to particular/local churches.\(^ {71}\) In article 22 it says:

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\(^{69}\) Hic universalitatis character, qui populum Dei condecorat, ipsius Domini donum est, quo catholica ecclesia efficaciter et perpetuo tendit ad recapitulandam totam humanitatem cum omnibus bonis eius, sub capite Christo, in unitate Spiritus eius. Vi huius catholicitatis, singulae partes propria dona ceteris partibus et toti ecclesiae afferunt, ita ut totum et singulae partes augeantur ex omnibus invicem communicantibus et ad plenitudinem in unitate conspirantibus.

\(^{70}\) “In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas.” [In necessary things unity; in uncertain things freedom; in everything charity].

\(^{71}\) See chapter 3 of \textit{Ad gentes}.\
Just as [it] happened in the economy of incarnation, the young churches, which are rooted in Christ and built on the foundations of the apostles, take over all the riches of the nations which have been given to Christ as an inheritance. They borrow from the customs, traditions, wisdom, teaching, arts and sciences of their people everything which could be used to praise the glory of the Creator . . .

[without syncretism and false exclusiveness] the Christian life will be adapted to the mentality and character of each culture, and local traditions together with the special qualities of each national family, illumined by the light of the Gospel, will be taken up into a Catholic unity. So new particular churches, each with its own traditions, have their place in the community of the Church . . .

What does the qualitative understanding of catholicity with its affirmation of diversity and particularity have to do with the theology of the local church? The positive treatment of the diversity and particularity of church life, which is most evident in various local churches means that the diverse local churches *qua* diverse contribute to the catholicity of the church as a whole. As *Lumen gentium* 23 states: “This multiplicity of local Churches, united in a common effort, shows all the more resplendently the catholicity of the undivided Church.” Locality and diversity are therefore not at odds with catholicity, but they build it up. What is at odds with catholicity is uniformity. In this insight lies the significance of the council’s expanded view of catholicity as unity-in-diversity or fullness-in-unity.

C. Church Local and Universal

The acknowledgement of the full ecclesial reality of the local church has implications for the conception of the relationship between the local and the universal church. If prior to the council, within the ecclesiology of *societas perfecta*, local churches were conceived as *parts* of the whole/universal church, after the council’s recognition of the full ecclesial reality of the local

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72. For more examples see *Ad gentes* 8–11, 16, 23, 26; *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* 2, 5; *Unitatis redintegratio* 14, 16–18; *Gaudium et spes* 53–55, 58, 61, 91.
church, this was no longer adequate. The local church which is wholly the church cannot relate to the universal church as a part to a whole.

The relationship between the local and the universal church is treated by Vatican II explicitly in article 23 of *Lumen gentium*. This article is part of the third chapter, which deals with the hierarchical structure of the church, and is the last one in a series of several articles (18–23) in which the council treats the notion of collegiality—the notion that the college of bishops (including the pope) rules the church—and teaches among other things that episcopal consecration confers the fullness of the sacrament of Orders (*LG* 21). Article 23 marks a shift in the conceptualization of the college of bishops. The preceding articles (20–22) treat collegiality of bishops within the universalistic ecclesiological framework. The starting point is the college as a whole and the focus is on the bishop’s membership in the college, which together with the pope as its head, never apart from him, shares in the supreme authority in the church as a whole. In article 23 the starting point shifts from the college and from the bishop’s membership in it to the bishop’s relationship to his local church. The college of bishops is thus conceptualized in relation to the communion of local churches.

The pertinent section of the article says:

Collegiate unity is also apparent in the mutual relations of each bishop to individual dioceses and with the universal church. . . . The individual bishops are the visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular Churches, which are constituted after the model of the universal Church; it is in these and formed out of them that the one and unique Catholic Church exists. And for that reason precisely each bishop represents his own Church, whereas all, together with the pope, represent the whole Church in a bond of peace, love and unity.\(^{73}\)

\(^{73}\) Collegialis unio etiam in mutuis relationibus singulorum episcoporum cum particularibus ecclesiis ecclesiaeque universalis apparat. . . . Episcopi autem singuli visible principium et fundamentum sunt unitatis in suis ecclesiis particularibus, ad imaginem ecclesiae universalis formatis in quibus et ex quibus una et unica ecclesia catholica existit. Qua de causa singuli episcopi suam ecclesiam, omnes autem simul cum papa totam ecclesiam repraesentant in vinculo pacis, amoris et unitatis.
It appears that this statement wants to assert the mutual interrelationship, in the sense of inclusion and interiority, between the local churches and the universal church. As Peter Hünermann observes, “such an affirmation is logically coherent only if the essence of the church glows and is present both in the particular churches and the universal church.” In addition, based on the phrase *in quibus et ex quibus* this statement also excludes an understanding that particular churches are parts of the church, which exists by assembling the parts together, and that the universal church is a federation of particular churches.

Nevertheless, the formulation of the mutual relationship between the local and the universal church is ambiguous. The difficulty is that *Lumen gentium* 23 simply juxtaposes seemingly contradictory assertions. On the one hand, it states that particular churches are constituted after the model of the universal church, and thus implies a priority of the universal church. On the other hand, it asserts that the one and unique catholic church is formed in and out of the particular churches, which implies the priority of the particular church. How both of these assertions can be true at the same time, within the same conceptual framework is not clear. The council thus left the issue of the relationship between the local and the universal church ultimately unresolved. The debates after the council’s close about which has primacy or priority, whether the universal church or the local churches, are understandable in light of this.

*Lumen gentium* 23 is also a good example of the terminological inconsistencies that are present in the writings about the church in general, not only in the documents of Vatican II. The

inconsistencies concern both the meaning of the word “church” and of the adjectives which modify it such as “universal,” “whole,” “one.” For instance, if *Lumen gentium* 23 wants to assert mutuality between the universal church and the local churches, why does it keep the term “particular churches” on one side of the equation but changes the other side from “universal church” to “one and unique catholic church”? Are these the same realities? I will return to this matter in chapter six.

2.3 **Theology of the Local Church after the Council**

From this short treatment of the local church in the documents of the Second Vatican Council one can conclude that the council did not develop either a robust or a fully coherent theology of the local church. After a rather long neglect of this topic in Catholic ecclesiology, the council provided some core insights of such theology, but a more systematic treatment was left to theologians after the council. I will now present several important elements of the theology of the local church in the work of three Catholic theologians—Leonardo Boff, Joseph Ratzinger, and Jean-Marie Roger Tillard—who developed their ecclesiologies after the council, and whose work advances the reception of the council in this area. As representatives of different theological contexts or locations, Boff, Ratzinger, and Tillard represent a variety of emphases and trajectories both in the reception of Vatican II’s theology of the local church and in its advancement. The purpose here is to outline some of the trajectories the theology of the local church took after Vatican II and by this to further prepare the context for examining the work of Joseph A. Komonchak. It is not possible here to present the theology of the local church of these authors in a comprehensive manner. My goal, rather, is to select and present a few components of their theology of the local church which could be considered their distinct
contribution to the field so that their theology of the local church and that of the council would serve as points of reference for the critical assessment of Komonchak’s work, which will take place in chapter six. Thus, my selection of the material from Boff, Ratzinger, and Tillard will be guided not only by what I consider their distinct impact on the theology of the local church, but also by what will be identified as Komonchak’s contribution in this area. This way it will be possible to compare and contrast Komonchak’s contribution to the theology of the local church and examine it vis-à-vis the contribution of the selected authors.

A. Leonardo Boff’s Theology of the Local Church

Leonardo Boff (1938–) is a Brazilian theologian and a major figure of Latin American liberation theology. In his ecclesiology Boff has been inspired mainly by the Second Vatican Council and by the theology of liberation. In his two main ecclesiological works—

*Ecclesiogenesis*\(^\text{76}\) and *Church: Charism and Power*\(^\text{77}\)—Boff provided a systematic evaluation and a critique of contemporary ecclesiologies. As John Markey notes, however,

> Boff does more than criticize: he outlines a broad ecclesiological vision that attempts to bring together an internal renewal of the Church as a community, with its external role as a sacrament of the salvation promised by the coming kingdom of God.\(^\text{78}\)

\(^{75}\) In chapter 5 I will identify three areas of Komonchak’s contribution to the theology of the local church: (1) the significance of locality for the theology of the local church, (2) the meaning of catholicity, and (3) the relationship of the local and universal church.


The connection between ecclesiology and soteriology plays a vital role in Boff’s writings. For him, the church must reclaim its soteriological mission which means that the church must mediate the presence of God’s Kingdom in history through its life and actions. It can do this, however, only by first reforming its structures and the actual practice of ecclesial life.

Boff’s ecclesiology is a version of communion ecclesiology in which he emphasizes the dynamic character of the church as the people of God, and where pneumatology plays a central role. Guided by the Spirit, the church, for Boff, does not have to see itself bound to past positions; rather, it should discern new ways in response to new situations. Boff insists that the church’s fundamental structure is charismatic. For him, “charism is more basic than the institution.”

Boff also puts much weight on social justice and in this way makes an important contribution to communion ecclesiology which would be incomplete without this link.

Boff’s distinct contribution to the theology of the local church concerns two issues: (1) what counts as a local church, and (2) the relationship between the local and the universal church. With regard to the former he argues that the base ecclesial communities should be understood theologically as (local) churches. With regard to the latter he argues that the universal church has priority over the local churches.

Boff approaches the issue of the definition of the local church by asking whether basic church communities are churches theologically considered or whether they merely contain elements of the church. Boff acknowledges that in the documents of Vatican II there is a

79. Boff, Church, 159.

80. Base ecclesial communities are small groups led by laity. They gather regularly to study and reflect on Scripture and/or for Communion services in the absence of a priest. They began in 1956 in Barra de Piral Diocese in Brazil.

81. See Boff, Ecclesiogenesis, 11.
tendency to define a (particular) church in terms of a diocese. The essential elements of such a particular church are the gospel, the Eucharist, and the apostolic ministry.\footnote{82 See Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis*, 14–15. Boff states that he is not interested in the issue of terminological inconsistency in the documents of Vatican II with regard to the designation “particular” and “local” church. See *Ecclesiogenesis*, 16.} He notes, however, that already in 1968, at the first conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellin, and then also at the 1974 Synod of Bishops, some proposed a broader understanding of a particular church. He gives an example of the French-speaking group of bishops at the 1974 synod which proposed that for pastoral reasons it would be better

not to reserve the expression “particular church” to a diocese (cf. *Lumen gentium*, nos. 23, 27), but, rather, to use it to designate any church rendering the service of the gospel in a particular human community, in communion with all the particular churches, which constitute the church universal.\footnote{83 “La notion d’Eglise particulière,” in *Documentation Catholique*, no. 1667 (January 1975); cited in Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis*, 15.}

This proposal for a broader definition of a particular church has a direct bearing on how Boff understands the base communities.

This enlarged understanding of what counts as a local church is shared also by those involved in the base ecclesial communities. Boff notes that they “tend to consider these communities as church.”\footnote{84 Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis*, 11.} For them basic communities are genuine churches because their goals are the same as those of the universal church. Consequently, they consider themselves to be “the true and authentic presence of the Catholic Church.”\footnote{85 Ibid., 13.} For Boff, these communities have a profoundly ecclesial character and function as the most basic units of the church because they
constitute the sacramental presence of the church.\textsuperscript{86} Boff does not think, however, that the ecclesial status of the base ecclesial communities can be considered adequately without addressing the question of the relationship between the universal church and the particular churches.

Boff is aware that this relationship is one of the most difficult issues in contemporary ecclesiology. He notes, however, that the terminological distinction between the universal and the particular is not specifically an ecclesiological problem, “but a basic one for all thought, and it has been one of the keys to philosophy from the days of the ancient Greeks onward.”\textsuperscript{87} Thus, for Boff, the relationship of the universal church and the particular churches must have its foundations in the philosophical understanding of the relationship of the one and the many, and in his Ecclesiogenesis he provides his interpretation of the issue.

Boff’s starting point is the universal church whose universality “resides in the universality of God’s salvific offer.”\textsuperscript{88} This offer manifests itself concretely in specific places and times and in real and concrete experiences. One of the expressions of this universal offer of salvation and at the same time its source is the particular or local church. As such it represents the universal church in a concrete place in history. But the universal church transcends and exists beyond the limits of any concrete particularity and by this Boff understands that the church

\textsuperscript{86} Boff wrote his doctoral dissertation (Munich, 1970) on the topic of the church as sacrament. It was published as Die Kirche als Sakrament im Horizont der Welterfahrung (Paderborn: Verlag Bonifacius-Druckerei, 1972). In it he shows in what measure the Church can be a sign of the Sacred and the Divine in the secular world and in the process of liberation of the oppressed.

\textsuperscript{87} Boff, Ecclesiogenesis, 16.

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
is a mystery in its nature. Yet, in history, this universality—which is God’s universality—must be made concrete, that is, it must be localized in a particular church community.\textsuperscript{89}

Boff explicitly rejects the understanding of the universal church as a confederation of local churches, in which the separate entities would join together to form a whole. The universal church is not what happens as the consequence of a confederation of local churches; rather, the “particular church is the universal church (the salvific will in Christ through the Spirit) in its phenomenal, or sacramental presentation.”\textsuperscript{90} Each particular church represents the church universal, but it does not exhaust it or totally equal it. Thus, particular churches must be open to and live in relationship with one another. The unity which results from this nevertheless does not exhaust the “wealth of the mystery of salvation”\textsuperscript{91} because, like the mystery of God, the universal church always remains greater than any particular manifestation of its presence. Thus, in Boff’s understanding, “the universal church—the mystery of salvation, the ecclesia deorsum, the church-from-above—enjoys primacy over the particular church because it is this church-from-above that exists in all of them.”\textsuperscript{92}

Faith, for Boff, constitutes the “initiating and structuring principle of the particular church.”\textsuperscript{93} The church exists as a community of faith, a community of the faithful where faith functions as the “minimum constitutive reality of a particular church.”\textsuperscript{94} This means, for Boff,
that “believers, by reason of their faith-and-community, are already in themselves, the presence of the universal church.”\textsuperscript{95} This presence grows in proportion to the visible gathering of the faithful. When they consciously gather around their leader to celebrate the Eucharist they are the sacramental presence of the Lord, and this sacramental presence increases when it can be expressed by a larger community of faith. Thus, Boff concludes that the base ecclesial communities represent the universal church “concretized on a small-group level.”\textsuperscript{96} They reflect both the unity of the worldwide communities of faith and also an eschatological dimension since they represent, though in a partial and limited way, the fulfillment of the universal salvific will of God, which will be fully realized only in the future coming of the Kingdom of God.

Furthermore, for Boff, the base communities constitute the “church-as-sacrament.”\textsuperscript{97} Through their sacramental dimension these base communities communicate the oneness of the church. Boff writes,

\begin{quote}
The concept of sacrament or mystery, then, expresses precisely the oneness of the universal church with the particular churches: it is always the universal church—the mystery of salvation, God’s salvific design—which is manifested in the differences occurring in human beings’ history. . . . Grace and salvation are always expressed in sacramental form.\textsuperscript{98}
\end{quote}

Hence, for Boff, the presence of the universal Church always appears in mediated ways, much like grace. These may vary in degree and complexity, but the mystery being mediated remains the same. For Boff, the base communities represent a particular kind of sacramentality, and although limited, this sacramentality genuinely makes visible the communion with universal

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 21.
church. In addition, because communion, for Boff, “is an indivisible reality, not admitting of
degree, [it] is either present or not”\textsuperscript{99} and therefore the base communities do not possess a lesser
or greater degree of communion. Rather, “in their own particular way, the base ecclesial
communities incarnate the experience of salvation”\textsuperscript{100} and function as forms of the authentic
universal church present at the grassroots.

By way of summary, Boff’s theology of the local church starts with the universal church,
whose universality he understands analogously to God’s universal offer of grace. The universal
church enjoys primacy over particular churches. This conceptualization leads him to view the
particular churches as expressions or mediations of the church universal localized in history.
The trademark of Boff’s theology of the local church is his insistence that the base ecclesial
communities may be designated as particular churches. Boff does not deny, however, that a
larger community of faith (e.g., a parish or a diocese) is also a particular or local church.

B. Joseph Ratzinger’s Theology of the Local Church

Joseph Ratzinger (1927–) has been one of the most important theological voices in the
post-conciliar period. His academic career included professorships at the universities of Bonn,
Münster, Tübingen, and Regensburg. At the Second Vatican Council he served as a peritus to
Josef Cardinal Frings of Cologne. In addition to being a professional theologian, from 1977
Ratzinger has held ecclesiastical office, first as Archbishop of Munich-Freising (1977), then as

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 22.

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.
Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1981, hereafter CDF), and from April 19, 2005 to February 28, 2013 as Bishop of Rome with the papal name Benedict XVI.\footnote{101}

In his writings Ratzinger has developed a version of communion ecclesiology which stems from the trinitarian life of God, is grounded in the Eucharist as the realization of the church \textit{par excellence}, and which extends to fellow human beings.\footnote{102} The focus here will be narrow, limited to Ratzinger’s theology of the local church. The two principal points which I will present and explore are, in my view, most characteristic of Ratzinger’s theology of the local church and could be considered his distinct contribution to the field. They are: (1) the eucharistic nature of the church, and (2) the historical and ontological priority of the universal church over the local church.

Ratzinger’s communion ecclesiology is thoroughly eucharistic. Its starting point is the Last Supper. For Ratzinger, Jesus’ actions and words at the Last Supper amount to founding the church.\footnote{103} He writes: “The Church came into being when the Lord had given his body and his blood under the forms of bread and wine, whereupon he said, ‘Do this in memory of me.’”\footnote{104}
Ratzinger considers the church to be the effect of this commission. He conceives the link between the Eucharist and the church so closely that he can say, “The Church is the celebration of the Eucharist; the Eucharist is the Church; they do not simply stand side by side; they are one and the same.”

In addition to its eucharistic nature, the church, for Ratzinger, is also a human community. It is “the gathering of men from the four corners of the earth and their purification for God.” Ratzinger insists that “the real locus of the church is not some kind of bureaucracy or the activity of a group which considers itself ‘basic’ but a ‘coming together.’” This coming together is the original meaning of ecclesia. With regard to the dynamism of the vertical and the horizontal in the church, Ratzinger has conceived the human element in the church as rather passive. For him, “one cannot make the Church but only receive it, that is receive it from where it already is and where it really is: from the sacramental community of Christ’s body passing through history.” He has cautioned against neglecting the view of the church as supernatural mystery by reducing the church to merely a sociological reality, eventually ending up collapsing the faith and its content to merely human and historical arbitrariness.

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106. Ratzinger, Called to Communion, 76.


The profound connection Ratzinger makes between the Eucharist and the church, according to which the “Church is effectively realized in the Eucharistic celebration, in which the word of preaching likewise becomes present,”¹¹⁰ has led him to affirm the genuine ecclesial reality of each local church. Since in every eucharistic celebration Christ is fully present, every such coming together “is wholly Church, for the Body of the Lord is always whole.”¹¹¹ Still, he is quick to point out that the individual eucharistic community can be church only if it is in union with other such communities, only if it is in the whole, because “the Body of the Lord, which is whole in every community, is, nevertheless, one Body in the whole Church.”¹¹²

An issue in the theology of the local church for which Ratzinger is perhaps most known concerns the nature of the relationship between the universal church and the particular churches. Ratzinger argues for the temporal and ontological priority of the universal church over the local churches. He bases his position on his interpretation of the Pentecost event from Acts 2. He writes:

[W]e find here a preliminary sketch of a Church that lives in manifold and multiform particular Churches but that precisely in this way is the one Church. At the same time, Luke expresses with this image the fact that at the moment of her birth, the Church was already catholic, already a world Church. Luke thus rules out a conception in which a local Church first arose in Jerusalem and then became the base for the gradual establishment of other local Churches that eventually grew into a federation. Luke tells us that the reverse is true: what first exists is the one Church, the Church that speaks in all tongues—the ecclesia universalis; she then generates Church in the most diverse locales, which nonetheless are all always embodiments of the one and only Church. The temporal and ontological priority lies with the universal Church.¹¹³

¹¹⁰. Ratzinger, Called to Communion, 77.
¹¹¹. Ratzinger, Principles, 252.
¹¹². Ibid., 252–53.
¹¹³. Ratzinger, Called to Communion, 44. Cf. also Church, Ecumenism and Politics, 75.
It is clear that Ratzinger understands the church disclosed at Pentecost as already the universal church.

Ratzinger has been criticized for his assertions of the historical and ontological priority of the universal church. Perhaps the best-known of his critics has been his fellow countryman and Cardinal Walter Kasper. Kasper’s criticism, which was initially addressed not directly at Ratzinger, but at the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith’s 1992 letter *Communionis notio*, turned into a public debate between the two. In his responses to Kasper, Ratzinger clarified and further developed his position. He remained convinced about the historical and ontological priority of the universal church. He argued on three grounds.

First, with regard to the ontological priority Ratzinger insisted that this was the teaching of the church Fathers, according to whom “the one and only Church precedes creation, and it is she who gives birth to the particular Churches.” With this assertion, Ratzinger explained, the

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Fathers continued in the rabbinical tradition, according to which the Torah and Israel pre-existed creation. Since the Fathers considered Israel and the church as ultimately identical, “they could not regard the Church as something that came into being at a late hour, by chance, but recognized in this gathering of the nations under the will of God the inner goal of creation.”

Ratzinger also insisted that the ontological priority of the church universal over the particular churches was also a teaching of the New Testament. It was found not only in Deutero-Pauline letters and the Apocalypse, but also in Paul’s letter to the Galatians (4:26), where he “talks to us about the heavenly Jerusalem, and indeed not as an eschatological entity, but as one that comes before us: ‘the Jerusalem above . . . is our mother.’”

Ratzinger stated that the ontological priority of the universal church over its empirical and concrete realizations in various individual parts of the church seemed so obvious to him that he found it difficult to find objections against it:

[The objections] seem to me to be possible at all only if one refuses to see God’s great idea, the Church—perhaps through despair at her inadequacy here on earth—if one will no longer and can no longer see it at all; it then appears as the product of a fit of theological enthusiasm, and all that remains is the empirical structure of the Church, her elements side-by-side in all their confusion and contradiction. Yet that means that the

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Ignatius Press, 2005), 123–52, at 134. This essay was originally a paper Ratzinger delivered at a conference on Vatican II in February 2000. Its title was “L’ecclesiologia della Constituzione ‘Lumen Gentium.’” It was published in Il Concilio Vaticano. Recezione e attualità alla luce del giubileo, ed. Rino Fisichella (Milano: San Paolo, 2000), 66–81. In terms of the Ratzinger/Kasper debate, this talk is considered Ratzinger’s first response to Kasper’s criticisms in “Zur Theologie und Praxis des bischöflichen Amtes.” Kasper was not a cardinal at this time. He became one on February 21, 2001. The main points of Ratzinger’s talk—those which dealt with the relationship of the universal church and the local church—were rearticulated by Ratzinger in “Das Verhältnis von Universalkirche und Ortskirche aus der Sicht des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils,” Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, December 22, 2000, 46.


119. Ibid., 135–36.

120. Ibid., 135.
Church is ruled out as a theme of theology at all. If you can no longer see the Church except as existing in human organizations, then hopelessness is in fact all there is left.\textsuperscript{121}

Second, with regard to temporal priority, Ratzinger rearticulated his understanding of the event of Pentecost. He was not interested in discussing the question of the account’s historicity, but rather its theological message. For him, the narrative from the Acts of the Apostles is a theological declaration according to which the church began with a gathering of 120 around Mary and the Twelve. The Twelve, for Ratzinger, were not members of a local church but were the apostles who would carry the gospel to the ends of the earth. He pointed out that from the very beginning the church was already speaking in every language, which was a “foreshadowing of the Catholica—*the Church is kat’holon* from the very first moment—comprehending the whole universe.”\textsuperscript{122} He rejected Kasper’s understanding of the Pentecost narrative, that the Jerusalem community was at the same time the universal and the local church, as unjustified. He insisted that based on Luke’s account

what comes first is not any original community at Jerusalem; what comes first is that, in the Twelve, the old Israel, which is one, becomes the new and that through the wonderful gift of tongues this new Israel of God is then shown before there is any question of constituting a local community in Jerusalem, to be a unity encompassing every time and place. . . . The Church was born in the Twelve of the Holy Spirit, from the beginning, for all peoples, and hence was from the beginning also oriented toward expressing herself in all cultures and being thereby the one People of God: here is no local congregation slowly spreading, but the yeast is always related to the whole and, hence from the very moment bears universality within itself.\textsuperscript{123}

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid. Italics mine.

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 136.

Third, Ratzinger provided further arguments for the priority of the universal church from the theology of baptism, Eucharist, and apostolic ministry. He contended that baptism is entirely a theological process, not just socialization into a local church. As such, baptism does not spring from the individual congregation; rather, in baptism the door is opened for us into the one Church: baptism is the presence of the one Church and can come only from her—from the Jerusalem that is above, from our new mother. . . . In baptism the universal Church always takes priority over the local Church and is creating her.\footnote{124. Ibid., 141; See also Joseph Ratzinger, “The Local Church and the Universal Church,” America 185, no. 16 (2001): 7–11, at 11. Ratzinger’s position here is identical to that of Congar. See supra p. 24.}

In regard to the Eucharist, Ratzinger stated that it neither originates from nor does it end in the local church. Like Christ who comes to us from without, passing through the locked doors, so the Eucharist “comes to us from without, from the whole, one body of Christ, and draws us into that body.”\footnote{125. Ratzinger, “The Ecclesiology of the Constitution Lumen Gentium,” 143.}

This extra nos dimension of the sacraments Ratzinger also elucidated in relation to the office of bishop and of priest. He stated that “the office of bishop arises from the one Church and leads into her.”\footnote{126. Ibid.} Within the local church, the bishop represents the one church and builds it up by building up the local church. He also stated that the office of Peter and its responsibility, as a special instance of the office of bishop “could not exist if the universal Church had not existed before it. Otherwise it would be grasping at emptiness and would represent an absurd claim.”\footnote{127. Ibid., 144.}

Ratzinger objected to two misconceptions, which he believed underlay Kasper’s objections to the temporal and ontological priority of the universal church over the local
churches. The first misconception was that the Congregation’s letter and Ratzinger himself identify the universal church with the Pope and the Curia. Ratzinger stated that “the letter from the congregation never dreamt of identifying the reality of the universal church with the pope and the curia, and hence the fears voiced by Kasper were groundless.” He also affirmed that he operates with the understanding of the Church of Rome as a local, not the universal church, even though the Church of Rome is a local church “with a peculiar, universal responsibility.” The second misconception to which Ratzinger objected had to do with his supposed understanding of the universal church as an abstraction. He objected to this charge as unjustified on the grounds that he “made a deliberate effort to present the practical reality of the Catholic Church and how it actually works” when he spoke about baptism, Eucharist, and ordained ministry.

By way of summary, Ratzinger acknowledges the full ecclesial reality of local churches as long as they remain in union with other local churches. Local churches are not subdivisions of the universal church, and the universal church is not a federation of local churches. Although he affirms the mutual interiority that exists between the local churches and the universal church, Ratzinger assigns temporal and ontological priority to the church universal. It appears that this position is closely linked with his understanding of the Petrine office and its responsibilities.

129. Ratzinger, “The Local Church and the Universal Church,” 8.
130. Ibid., 10.
especially as they evolved in the second millennium, which Ratzinger seems to be able to ground theologically only within such a precedence of the universal church. In Ratzinger’s view, it appears to be the necessary supposition for the claim of *plenitudo potestatis et iurisdictionis* of the Petrine office.

C. Jean-Marie Roger Tillard’s Theology of the Local Church

Judging by the number of monographs dedicated to ecclesiology, Jean-Marie Roger Tillard, O. P. (1927–2000) is the most prolific ecclesiologist of the three authors considered here.133 His ecclesiology is robust and one of the most comprehensive among his contemporaries. With the exception of method or foundations in ecclesiology Tillard has addressed perhaps all the main topics in ecclesiology. It is not possible to do justice to Tillard’s rich thinking on the theology of the local church in the pages available in this chapter.134 As with the previous two authors, my goal is to select and present some components of Tillard’s theology of the local church which I consider his distinct contribution to the field and which will serve as points of reference for a critical assessment of Joseph Komonchak’s own contribution to the theology of the local church. My primary focus will be on Tillard’s *Church of Churches* and *L’Église locale*, the latter representing his most mature thinking on the local church.


Tillard grounds his theology of the local church in an understanding of the church as communion, which is the key concept of his ecclesiology as a whole, structuring all its elements. Tillard first systematically articulated an ecclesiology of communion in *Church of Churches*. He defines communion as “a share in the work of God so as to belong to the mystery of the eschatological period.” His understanding of communion is multifaceted, including the notion of catholicity as unity-in-diversity and extending to soteriology and anthropology. Communion is for Tillard synonymous with salvation. He writes, “If we had to sum up in one word the real context of Salvation . . . we would use, following many of the Fathers, *communion*, the word which sums up Acts. In biblical thought, as it is understood in the first centuries, Salvation is called *communion*.”

Communion for Tillard is the answer to the human predicament manifested in the drama of history as the isolation which humans create, leading to “a broken world in which individuals live side by side without establishing authentic bonds of communion.” In Tillard’s view, communion negates and reverses this isolation because it is “nothing else than the restoring of the fundamental relationship between communion and singularity, making authentic human existence for each person individually, as for the collective destiny of humanity.”

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137. Ibid., 17.

138. Ibid.

139. Ibid., 18.
believes that God wills the church to be the place where such restoration of humanity should take place.

Theology of the local church is the apex of Tillard’s ecclesiology of communion. It is comprehensive in content, encompassing perhaps all the topics which a theology of the local church is expected to cover. One could say that with Tillard’s *L’Église locale* the reception of Vatican II’s theology of the local church has reached a certain culmination, in the sense that Tillard has identified all the issues such a theology is supposed to address. Tillard proves to be steeped in the tradition, drawing especially on biblical and patristic but also on medieval, canonical, liturgical, and spiritual sources, in addition to dialoguing with contemporary ecclesiologists. I will focus on three elements of Tillard’s theology of the local church: (1) his conception of catholicity, including the significance of locality and of the notion of recognition, (2) the connection between the Eucharist and the church, and (3) the relationship between the local and the universal church.

The notion of the church’s catholicity holds a prominent place in Tillard’s theology of the local church. It is the initial topic in *L’Église locale* to which he dedicates almost 150 pages. He explores its rich meaning encompassing both quantitative and qualitative dimensions, though he clearly prefers and focuses on the latter. Tillard argues that catholicity applies to the church on both the local and universal level. His starting point is the event of Pentecost. He believes that the account of Pentecost in Acts of the Apostles (2:1–13) discloses the depth and richness of the meaning of catholicity.
From the account of the church’s emergence on the day of Pentecost Tillard concludes that the church has been catholic from its inception in the sense of displaying the *katholou*—the plenitude, the fullness of the gift of God. He says:

The Pentecost community of Jerusalem understands, in the Spirit, that it is situated precisely at this moment of fullness. It is revealing itself as the fulfillment of the *Qahal* of God, “Ekklesia tou Theou,” “the church of God.” . . .

Since it emerges thus from the assembly of Pentecost (the memorial of the Assembly in the Desert) as the *fulfillment* of what the gathering of the *Qahal* aimed at, the church of Jerusalem is therefore right from the beginning born catholic—for it contains the fullness, the integrity, the *katholou* of the gift of God. The church of Jerusalem is thus the community where the divine *oikonomia* attains its moment (*kairos*) of plenitude. Therefore it is not merely a question of geographic universality whose prophetic core is already the nations represented by the proselytes gathered for the feast (Acts 2:5.8–11). It is rather a question of the realization in its wholeness of that which comprises the call (or gathering) of God.140

Tillard emphasizes that this church which is born catholic is born in a place, namely in Jerusalem. The place of the church’s emergence is by no means accidental in Tillard’s view. He explains:

This notion of *place* is by no means accidental. *Ekklesia* shows itself in the *place* where God willed that Christ would die and rise because in that place the heart of Israel beats. . . .

The church emerges catholic but with a catholicity whose nature is marked by the *place* where the Spirit of God brings about birth by means of Israel. The church cannot be grasped at its depth without the Spirit of God. In short, the church is born as the *local catholic church*, catholic in its *place*, which is the pivotal place of the divine design for all humanity.141


141. “Ce *lieu* n’a rien d’accidentel. L’*Ekklesia* apparaît dans le *lieu* où Dieu a voulu que le Christ meure et ressuscite parce qu’en ce *lieu* bat le cœur d’Israël. . . . L’*Ekklesia* surgit catholique, mais d’une catholicité dont la
As for the other churches, they will emerge from this local catholic church of Jerusalem not by being added to it, or by being its extensions or parts, but by entering into its grace, into a communion with it. They will be equally churches of God. The church of Jerusalem “will [thus] multiply itself without being divided.” Tillard points out that the Jerusalem church will not be endowed with more ecclesial reality and catholicity than the churches which will spring up from her. Thus based on its origin and essence Tillard shows that catholicity is encountered originally in a local church, in the apostolic church of Jerusalem. In fact, the churches will always maintain a reference to a place (i.e., Antioch, Corinth, Rome, etc.) and their catholicity will require that they avoid isolation and enter into communion with one another.

Tillard’s reflections on catholicity of the local church display a rich understanding of locality. Its importance for Tillard lies in his conception that the church of God exists only in and through the local churches. He describes each local church as

the human space (geographic, cultural, historical, and sociological) where the Gospel of God—“effected” in Jerusalem by the suffering of Christ and by Pentecost which manifests its effects—can be grasped as including both *homo* (human being) and *humus* (the earth) from which it sprouts, *homo* as *humus*, *homo* and his *humus*.

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142. See ibid., 40.
Locality for Tillard is not just a geographical category, but has an anthropological dimension touching upon the totality of the human condition.

In Tillard’s understanding the church is catholic precisely because it is local. It is in the local church where one witnesses the interplay of various elements, possibly contradictory at first sight. It is in the interplay among them that the catholicity, the fullness of the church of God, is realized. Tillard ultimately argues that the church is catholic because it is of God who is catholic in his design of salvation. “The essence of the local church is found in its catholicity without which it would no longer be of God. It is the catholic church of God in this place.”

Tillard understands catholicity as the opposite of uniformity; it is unity-in-diversity. The notion of unity-in-diversity is synonymous with his understanding of communion and is already a characteristic of the church which emerged at Pentecost. He explains:

The Pentecostal community—the basic cell of the Church—thus appears as the manifestation, the epiphaneia, of the opening up of the era of Salvation. This is so in the coming together, radically unbreakable, of three elements: the Spirit, the apostolic witness which centers on the Lord Jesus Christ, and the communion in which the human multitude and its diversity are contained within this unity and where the unity is expressed in the multitude and its diversity. These three elements belong to the very essence of the Church.

The understanding of catholicity as unity-in-diversity, which is already present in the documents of Vatican II, allows Tillard to eliminate tensions between unity and diversity arising when catholicity is equated with mere universality. Tillard shows that neither unity and diversity nor catholicity and locality are mutually exclusive.

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146. See Ibid., 125.

147 “L’Église locale se trouve transpercée par cette catholicité sans laquelle elle ne serait plus de Dieu. Elle est l’Église catholique de Dieu en ce lieu.” Ibid., 141.

148. Tillard, Church of Churches, 8.
Catholicity for Tillard is a mark not only of the local church but also of the church of God which Tillard understands as the communion existing among the local churches. Here is where another crucial theme of Tillard’s theology of the local church comes into play: the notion of “recognition.” This notion presupposes that each local church is truly the church of God and that the local churches are oriented toward one another. Recognition, as Tillard understands it, serves catholicity because it ensures genuine unity-in-diversity. He defines recognition as

the attitude by which a Church discerns within the differences of expression or rites and within the plurality of traditions the evangelical faith and practice which are proper to it. In other words, within the difference of words and forms, the multiplicity of responses required by the extreme variability of situations, even the variety of readings and interpretations, it perceives the same fidelity to the one and same Revelation.149

The notion of recognition is a crucial element in Tillard’s conception of communion existing among the churches. If that communion is not to be an illusion or envisioned in purely juridical terms, local churches must recognize one another as the churches of God.150 Recognition is fundamentally about one local church finding in another local church such essential things as “identity of faith and foundation on the apostolic witness, sacramental economy and Eucharist, mission, the fundamental understanding of life ‘in Christ,’ the service of the same apostolic ministry.”151

149. Ibid., 224.
151. “identité de foi et de fondation sur le témoignage apostolique, d’économie sacramentelle et d’Eucharistie, de mission, de conception fondamentale de la vie « dans le Christ », avec le service d’un même ministère apostolique.” Ibid., 92.
Tillard notes that the notion of “recognition” is not a novelty, but he also points out that in certain circles it has not been understood correctly, even treated with suspicion for concealing in itself “cheap unity.” He objects to such an understanding saying:

On the contrary, it is a question of an extremely demanding vision. In effect that which pertains to “recognition” refers neither to good will, nor a simple desire to better understand, or a pure pragmatic plan to work together better, still less to the least common denominator for sealing an agreement of easy consensus. To present the concept of recognition from this angle is to make a caricature, against which one must protest.

Tillard’s theology of the local church is thoroughly eucharistic. He considers the Eucharist to be “the central event in the life of the visible church.” It is constitutive of the church so that “wherever there is true Eucharist there is truly Church. Church is, therefore, every local community gathered together by the Eucharist.” This intimate connection between the Eucharist and the presence of the church means that it is not possible to define the church in formal terms without reference to eucharistic communities. Local church for Tillard is the totality of eucharistic communities in communion with their bishop. Consequently, the church is “a communion of local communities . . . a communion of communions.”

152. See Ibid., 91.
153. “Il s’agit, au contraire, d’une vision extrêmement exigeante. En effet, ce qu’il s’agit de « reconnaître » n’est ni la bonne volonté, ni le simple désir de mieux s’entendre, ni le pur dessein pragmatique de mieux travailler ensemble, encore moins le plus petit dénominateur commun permettant de sceller un consensus facile. Présenter la « reconnaissance » sous cet angle, c’est faire une caricature contre laquelle il faut protester.” Ibid.
155. Tillard, Church of Churches, 28.
156. Ibid., 29.
157. Ibid.
As we have seen with Boff and Ratzinger, in the aftermath of Vatican II the question of the relationship between the universal church and the local church has been an important issue in the theology of the local church. Both Boff and Ratzinger affirm the priority of the universal church. The position implied in Tillard’s ecclesiology is that of simultaneity of the universal church and the local church.

Tillard’s position is mostly evident in his understanding of the church’s catholicity. As stated above, Tillard considers the church from its very beginning to be simultaneously local and catholic/universal. The church of Pentecost did not start just as a local church and then become universal by adding other churches to itself or by a way of federation with other independently originated churches. Nor did it start as universal and then divide itself into local churches, which would be considered its parts. Instead the universal or catholic church emerged through a process which Tillard calls recognition. It is a process by which local churches recognize in one another the presence of the church of God. In other words, the catholic church emerges as a communion of local churches. The universal church is the world-wide communion of local churches. Within this framework the question of priority among the universal church and the local churches does not arise.

Simultaneity of the local and the universal church can also be inferred from Tillard’s understanding of the ecclesial communion modeled on the trinitarian life of God. He writes:

The nature of the Church, as early Tradition understands it, is, therefore, summed up in communion, koinonia. It is the Church of Churches. Understood in its full context, it is the communion of communions, appearing as a communion of local Churches, spread

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158. Tillard is not fond of using the adjective “universal” for the church. He suggests reserving it only for God’s plan of redemption of all. The church of churches, which is the communion of local churches and the sacrament of God’s redemptive plan, he prefers to qualify by its catholicity. See “Église catholique ou église universelle?” Cristianesimo nella Storia 16 (1995): 341–59.
throughout the world, each one itself being a *communion* of the baptized, gathered
together into communities by the Holy Spirit, on the basis of their baptism, for the
Eucharistic celebration. This existence as *communion* constitutes its essence. And the
relationship to *communion* with the Father, Son and Spirit shows its deep-rootedness
even in the eternal reality of the mystery of God.\textsuperscript{159}

If the church’s communion is rooted in the Trinity, the one and the many are not exclusive
categories, but rather they exist simultaneously. Neither of them has priority.

By way of summary, within an ecclesiology of communion Tillard developed a robust
theology of the local church in which the local church is the church of God in its fullness in a
particular place as long as it remains in communion with other local churches. The local church
is realized most intensely in the eucharistic celebration. Important features of Tillard’s theology
of the local church include the qualitative understanding of the church’s oneness and catholicity
and the notion of reception. Tillard affirms the simultaneity of the local church and the universal
church.

2.4. **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have treated the theology of the local church by first presenting its
retrieval in the decades prior to the Second Vatican Council, then by discussing its place in the
documents of Vatican II, and lastly by presenting the main elements of the theology of the local
church as developed after the council by three Catholic theologians—Leonardo Boff, Joseph
Ratzinger, and Jean-Marie Roger Tillard. The main concern present throughout the chapter was
methodological, namely, to provide a context for Joseph Komonchak’s own work on the
theology of the local church, and to set up the point of reference against which his work will be
evaluated at the end of this study.

\textsuperscript{159} Tillard, *Church of Churches*, 29.
In the first part of the chapter I showed that the ecclesiological renewal at the Second Vatican Council with regard to the theology of the local church did not happen in a vacuum, but was preceded by a renewal in ecclesiology whose seeds were sown in nineteenth century by scholars such as Johan Adam Möhler and Adrien Gréa. It reached its full force, however, only with the *ressourcement* theologians in the first half of the twentieth century. They were also influenced by a group of Russian theologians, especially Nicholas Afanasiev, who recovered the ancient patristic ecclesiology. As theological experts at Vatican II, both Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar—the most prominent ecclesiologists among the *ressourcement* theologians—had a significant impact on the council’s ecclesiology.

In the second part of the chapter I discussed the contribution of Vatican II to the theology of the local church. Although the theology of the local church does not structure the conciliar documents as a whole, but plays just a minor role, I showed that Vatican II can be credited with significant advances in the theology of the local church. Perhaps the most significant among them is the affirmation of the full ecclesial reality of a local church. The council did this in two ways: first, by making a connection between the bishop, the Eucharist, and the church, namely, by asserting that when a local community celebrates the Eucharist—especially presided over by their bishop—there is the full reality of the church; and second, by asserting that the local church is a realization of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Based on these two affirmations, it is no longer possible, as it was common prior to Vatican II, to consider the local church to be merely an administrative subsection of the universal church, nor a bishop as the vicar of the pope. Rather, the local church is fully church, though not the whole church.
The council’s expanded notion of catholicity also has important implications for the theology of the local church. Vatican II recovered the qualitative dimension of catholicity and in many places understood this mark of the church as unity-in-diversity or fullness-in-unity. Central to this understanding of catholicity is the positive appreciation of diversity and particularity. In this understanding, catholicity is not in tension with locality and diversity, but with uniformity. Locality and diversity actually build up catholicity. Related to this view of catholicity is the notion that local churches not only receive from but also offer to the universal church their gifts and insights. This exchange of gifts, whether cultural or social, points to the fact that church is not only a noun, but also a verb. It is an event which happens in particular social and cultural contexts.

A major point of tension in the council’s theology of the local church is that of the mutual relation between the local and universal church. Although Vatican II excluded the notion of the local church as a mere subsection of the universal church, and spoke about the relationship of the local and universal church in terms of mutual inclusion and interiority, it ultimately left the exact relationship unresolved. The reason is that it also asserted that local churches are modeled on the image of the universal church. The council never showed, however, how these two assertions can be true at the same time.

The three theologians treated in last section of this chapter agree that the local church is the church of God in a given place, and that it is fully church though not the whole church. For the most part they also agree that the local church is to be identified with a diocese, even though Boff would argue that the basic ecclesial communities also deserve the status of a local church, and as such are manifestations of the church universal. The disagreement among them is in
regard to the mutual relationship of the local and the universal church. It might seem that, with all the emphasis Boff places on the basic ecclesial communities, he would affirm the priority of the local church over the church universal, but as was demonstrated above even Boff ultimately affirms the priority of the universal church over the local churches—a position most clearly argued by Ratzinger who speaks about the ontological and chronological priority of the universal church over the local churches. Tillard disagrees with this position, especially as presented by Ratzinger, and argues for the mutual simultaneity of the local churches and the universal church, where the latter is conceived as the communion of local churches, as the *church of churches*. In fact, there is no reason why the question of priority would even arise in Tillard’s theology of the local church.
CHAPTER 3
Joseph A. Komonchak on Vatican II: Its Interpretation and Its Significance for
Ecclesiology

Discussing the recovery of the theology of the local church by theologians prior to
Vatican II and by the council itself, and presenting some trajectories the theology of the local
church has taken after the council, the previous chapter provided the historical context for this
study, which will now focus on Joseph Komonchak’s contribution to the theology of the local
church. This will happen in three steps, each comprising a chapter. The first step will be an
examination of how Komonchak interprets the Second Vatican Council and its ecclesiology in
particular. The second step will focus on the methodological foundations of Komonchak’s
theology of the local church. Lastly, the third step will consist of presenting Komonchak’s
theology of the local church.

The Second Vatican Council was primarily concerned with ecclesiology. Its two
constitutions on the church—the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen gentium, and the
Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et spes—stand at the center
of the council’s vision for the church’s renewal, although such concern is not limited to these
two constitutions, but is found in the fourteen remaining documents as well. Vatican II’s re-
visioning of the church provided the new context for the work of Catholic theology in general
and of ecclesiology in particular. In the years immediately following the council, Catholic
theologians began to interpret, develop, and advance the insights of the council. Joseph A.
Komonchak belongs to that generation of theologians. His basic theological training and studies
for a licentiate took place in the pre-Vatican II theological tradition but his doctoral studies as
well as his theological career unfolded after Vatican II in the theological setting shaped by the council. Vatican II’s vision for the church, thus, underlies Komonchak’s entire theological project. Since the implementation of the council, particularly its ecclesiology, has functioned as an overarching context of Komonchak’s work as a theologian, it seems logical to continue this study by first taking a broad look at Komonchak’s view of the council.

This is the goal of the present chapter. It will consist of two sections. The first will discuss how Komonchak interprets the council, and the second will present Komonchak’s understanding of the significance of the Vatican II for ecclesiology.

3.1. **Vatican II and Its Interpretation**

The Second Vatican Council was in some respects a unique event in the life of the Catholic Church. It was the council with most participants in attendance, and it was also most representative of various nations and cultures. More than at any other council before, non-Catholic and lay observers took part at Vatican II. It was the first council to have at its disposal technological advancements such as electric lighting, microphones, telephones, tape recording, television equipment, data processing, and airplanes. Another thing that sets Vatican II apart from previous ecumenical councils is that while they had usually met in response to some crisis in the church, often doctrinal in nature, there was no indication of one in January of 1959 when Pope John XXIII announced his intention to convene Vatican II. Thus, it is somewhat ironic that something like a crisis began to unfold once the council was over.

In the speech at the opening of the first conciliar session (October 11, 1962) the Pope outlined his vision for the council. He provided insights as to what he wanted the council to accomplish.
Illuminated by the light of this council, the Church—we confidently trust—will become greater in spiritual riches and, gaining the strength of new energies therefrom, she will look to the future without fear. In fact, by bringing herself up-to-date where required, the Church will make men [sic], families and peoples really turn their minds to heavenly things. . . .

This excerpt illustrates that the Pope’s intention for the council was to bring about renewal of the church and an aggiornamento—an updating with the times. He furthermore desired the council to make a significant step in the direction of the reunion of divided Christians. The bishops took up this vision of the pope, inscribed it into the sixteen documents which the council produced, and returned to their dioceses. The task of implementing the council then started. This task, however, has generated many difficulties which point to a lack of consensus about the council’s interpretation.

Komonchak has published many articles in which he explores the topic of the council’s interpretation. He is also a historian of the council and has published several studies which treat


the history of Vatican II. With regard to the council’s interpretation, Komonchak has argued for a view he has called an alternative middle position, and has contrasted it with three other views—progressive, traditionalist, and middle—which cover the broad spectrum in the field of Vatican II hermeneutics. Komonchak believes that his alternative middle position is the most adequate, not only because it avoids the one-sidedness of the progressive and the traditionalist positions, but also because it is able to account for and explain more cogently than the middle position both the conciliar dynamics and the change that took place in Catholicism after Vatican II. Komonchak’s position is not constructed on the theological data alone, but is also a result of his engagement with the social sciences. This point will be brought up regularly throughout this study as it is a trademark of Komonchak’s theological project.

A. An Alternative Middle Position

In setting up his middle position Komonchak first describes the three most common interpretations of the Second Vatican Council. He sets up these interpretations as ideal types. The first one he calls the “progressive” interpretation. This position sets a dramatic contrast between the pre- and the post-conciliar church, where the former is evaluated almost entirely in negative terms. Adjectives such as legalistic, triumphalistic, hierarchical, patriarchal, ghetto-like, clericalistic, and irrelevant are often used to describe it. The progressives see the accommodations to modernity, which the church finally made at Vatican II, and which it had

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resisted for over a century, as long overdue. They perceive the council as the “new Pentecost.” This view acknowledges that there have been problems and confusion in the church after the council, but this has been mainly because of the intransigence of some, especially in the Roman Curia, who opposed the direction the council was taking while it was in session, and who after its close continued to undermine the forces of renewal and resist the spirit of the council.\(^5\) The U.S. weekly *National Catholic Reporter* is the only source Komonchak makes a reference to and thus gives an indication of whom he has in mind for this category.\(^6\)

The second interpretation Komonchak calls “traditionalist.” This view also sets a dramatic contrast between the pre- and the post-conciliar church, but this time to the disadvantage of the latter. Traditionalists speak with nostalgia of the pre-conciliar church and consider the council a regrettable surrender of the church to the forces it had consistently opposed, namely liberalism and modernism. The most extreme version of this view would consider the council heretical. The proponents of the traditionalist interpretation tend to concentrate on *Gaudium et spes* and *Dignitatis humanae* as two documents in which the council accepted important developments and principles characteristic of liberalism and modernism. The problems and confusion that followed in the council’s aftermath are in this view blamed on Vatican II itself, for it gave rise to movements which were amplified by the radicals to the point


\(^6\) Komonchak, “Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism,” 354.
of destroying the church. Komonchak names the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre as a representative of this position.

Komonchak points out that these two interpretations differ less on the details of what happened at the council than on how to interpret it. The crucial point of contention for these interpretations is the church’s relation to the modern world. Komonchak also notes that the differences between these two interpretations represent the “drama of the Council itself,” and states that the council “was not a peaceful event”; rather, that it “unfolded as a confrontation, even a battle, and those who witnessed it will remember with some vividness that the outcome was by no means secure.”

Komonchak holds that there is a lot of room in between these two rather extreme positions for a “middle position.” This interpretation views the majority of the council in positive terms but considers some developments that followed after the council to have been unfavorable to the church. The problems and confusion which settled upon the church after the council are not blamed on the council itself but mainly on the progressives who, with their appeal to the “spirit” of the council, went far beyond what the conciliar texts have said as well as beyond the intentions of the council. This view blames the progressives for too eager an accommodation to the values of bourgeois Western culture, and advocates a return to the authentic council and its authentic teachings. The proponents of this position, which


Komonchak also calls “reformist,” think that the council was hijacked, but unlike the traditionalists, for whom this took place during the council, the reformists claim that the council was hijacked after it was over by those who misrepresented what the council actually did. They deny that the council authorized or represented a sharp break with the past. Rather, it was marked more by continuity than discontinuity. The ruptures of the kind advocated by the progressives they reject. Komonchak names Henri de Lubac and Joseph Ratzinger as the most prominent representatives of this view.

The conflict over the interpretation of Vatican II reached a considerable degree of intensity when on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the council’s close an Extraordinary Synod of Bishops was held in Rome in November and December of 1985. The Synod was to review, evaluate, and celebrate the achievements of Vatican II. The interpretation and the significance of the council for the church naturally had high priority in the debates. Komonchak explains that very few bishops at the Synod adopted one of the extreme positions, but at the same time, most of them had a problem with the middle position as advocated by Ratzinger. Komonchak understands the debates at the Synod as a search for an alternative middle position, a version of which he advocates.

Komonchak’s point of departure for his alternative middle position is what none of the three views seems to contest, namely, that “the everyday Catholicism that had existed right up

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through the reign of Pius XII had collapsed.” Progressives consider this to be a positive thing. Traditionalists and the reformists deplore it, although they disagree on whether the council itself should be blamed for the collapse. Komonchak believes that an adequate interpretation of the council and of its aftermath is not possible without, first, a thorough analysis of the Catholicism which collapsed, and second, an evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses. Unless one understands this Catholicism, Komonchak does not think one can understand “either the drama of the Council itself or the even more remarkable changes which followed it” or “to address the questions why these occurred and whether the Council could be considered responsible for them.”

Komonchak calls this Catholicism modern Roman Catholicism, and he provides its analysis in two of his articles. With this term he refers to “the social form the Catholic Church assumed in the century and a half between the Congress of Vienna and the Second Vatican Council.” In response to the challenges that faced it, the church constructed itself as a counter-society embodying a counter-culture. Komonchak argues that during this period the Catholic Church took on a new sociological and historical form that was as different from the Catholicism of the post-Tridentine period, which had preceded it, as the latter was different from its predecessor, Medieval Christendom, and this in turn from its predecessor, ancient Christianity.

16. Komonchak, “The Enlightenment and the Construction of Roman Catholicism,” 32. Komonchak says that for the notion of “Roman Catholicism” he is indebted especially to the Swiss sociologist Franz-Xaver Kaufmann. See note 1 of “The Enlightenment and the Construction of Roman Catholicism.”
Komonchak identifies the century between the Congress of Vienna (1814–15) and the pontificate of Pius X (1903–14) as the formative period of this modern Roman Catholicism.\(^{17}\) He explains that during this period many Catholics believed they were engaged in a great battle which had its origins in the Reformation and was manifested most recently in the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the Napoleonic era. The principles on which the modern world was being constructed such as rationalism, repudiation of authority and tradition, and individual autonomy, were altering the social and cultural position and the role of the church in society. In addition, the denial of religion’s significance for the public sphere was seen by the church as a departure and even apostasy from the political, social and cultural ideal of Christendom. These developments were summed up by the name “liberalism.”\(^{18}\) As a result, what Catholics stood for in terms of truth and values was under attack and throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries they fought against the principles of liberalism.\(^{19}\)

Komonchak’s thesis is that during the hundred and fifty years prior to Vatican II Catholicism was principally engaged with the social and political ramifications of the Enlightenment, not only with its philosophical and theological dimensions. The broader issues were cultural, political and social.\(^{20}\) Unlike at the time of the Reformation, however, when the

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17. The Congress of Vienna was a meeting of the ambassadors of European states which took place in Vienna from September 1814 to June 1815. Its purpose was to restore order after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. Among its results was the restoration of the Pope (Pius VII) as the absolute monarch of the Papal States after these had been seized by Napoleon and the Pope arrested. For a history of the Congress see Charles K. Webster, *The Congress of Vienna, 1814–1815* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1963).


disputes were over the basic aspects of the faith or regarding the internal constitution of the church, the fight against the Enlightenment was over what role, if any, religion should play with regard to the foundation and unity of society and over the religious responsibilities of States. During the post-Enlightenment period the church faced new challenges and to confront them it had to become something different in form and structure from what it hitherto had been. Thus, in response to the new challenges the church constructed itself as an alternative to the world of secular liberalism.

Komonchak describes five central characteristics of this modern Roman Catholicism. The first characteristic of this period is the desire to restore medieval Christendom which was considered an ideal form of the relationship between the church and society. The church turned to the Middle Ages in support of its political and cultural project. Komonchak gives examples from the writings of the popes which show how the official church teaching expressed a deep regret of the loss of Christendom and the desire to regain it.

Komonchak identifies “counter-revolutionary mysticism” and the “formation of Catholic associations” as the second and third characteristics of modern Roman Catholicism. They were a response to the challenges of modern society against which the church’s leadership wanted to protect Catholics. With regard to the former, Komonchak explains that the situation of alienation

21. One of the presuppositions guiding Komonchak’s discussion of the modern Roman Catholicism is that there is a distinction between the church as a theological theme and as a social form in which it is embodied during different historical periods. By modern Roman Catholicism Komonchak means the concrete self-realization of the church which took place during the 150 years before Vatican II. The distinction between the church as a theological theme and as a social form will be discussed in the following chapter.


from the emerging society and culture in which the church found itself played a significant role in the promotion of many devotions which marked Catholic life and were constituent of Catholic identity in that period. There was an extraordinary growth in Marian piety, while the devotions to the Sacred Heart and to Christ the King also underwent significant development at this time. With regard to the latter, Komonchak explains that associations, which were not something new in Catholic life, changed in their purpose and goals during this period. While earlier their purpose was primarily religious, those associations that originated in the late eighteenth and especially in the nineteenth century began to operate with social and political goals, namely, they combated the spread of the Enlightenment, opposed the spread of liberalism, safeguarded Catholic rights, and supported Catholic identity.

The fourth characteristic of the modern Roman Catholicism was the increased centralization of the church upon Rome and the papacy. Komonchak explains that the church considered itself to be in a battle international in scope, and in order to be effective the defense had to be organized on the international level too. Thus, the papacy was the most fitting candidate for a leading role in this struggle. During this period the appointment of bishops by the pope gradually became the norm. National synods practically lost their significance. Local churches began to imitate Roman liturgical, canonical, and devotional customs and practices.


Bishops’ autonomy over their churches was diminished, almost reducing the bishops to the status of vicars of the pope. In ways uncommon previously, Catholicism was becoming Roman.26

The fifth characteristic of Komonchak’s account of modern Roman Catholicism concerns the direction of Catholic intellectual life, namely, it refers to the effort of the centralized ecclesial leadership to take direction of Catholic thought. Komonchak explains that during the pontificates of Gregory XVI and Pius IX noteworthy efforts by theologians in the fields of faith and reason and religion and modern society were viewed with suspicion at best, at times with condemnation. Under Leo XIII the philosophical and theological synthesis worked out by Thomas Aquinas was raised to the level of norm to which everyone had to conform and by which everyone’s work was evaluated.27 Beginning with Leo XIII the popes also began to regularly issue encyclicals through which they both supervised and directed the intellectual life of the church. Catholics were becoming accustomed at looking to the Popes for authoritative guidance and there was an increased subordination to Roman authority, especially in matters pertaining to bishops and theologians.28

Komonchak argues that the result of these and other developments was the construction of a Catholic sub-culture. The church was ideologically at odds with both liberalism and its competitors—socialism and communism. It responded by constructing itself as “another world of meaning and value, a distinct social body within the larger society, a culture distinct from that


27. See Leo XIII, Aeterni Patris (1879).

which directed the ruling and planning classes.”

This modern Roman Catholicism was “forced to compete in a marketplace of meaning and value not only with other religious bodies, but with secular systems which throughout the century gained more and more political power and more and more control over the minds of man.”

This historical study of modern Roman Catholicism has allowed Komonchak to argue several points with regard to the interpretation of Vatican II. First, while those espousing the progressive, traditionalist, or the middle view agree that the everyday Catholicism as it existed until the pontificate of John XXIII collapsed, Komonchak is able to pin down with more precision what had collapsed. His answer is that it was a particular historical and social form of the church, the one he calls modern Roman Catholicism.

Second, the traditionalist and the middle positions deplore the collapse of pre-Vatican II Catholicism, even though they disagree on whether the council is responsible for it. Those in the former view say “yes,” and those in the latter say “no.” Komonchak explains that Henri de Lubac and Joseph Ratzinger, who are among the most prominent proponents of the middle view, insist that the popes and bishops who made Vatican II happen never intended the council to be a revolution or to produce a new church, but rather they desired a spiritual renewal and pastoral reform in the church. Although Komonchak agrees with de Lubac and Ratzinger on this point, he does not think that the question of the council’s responsibility for the collapse of the pre-Vatican II Catholicism can be resolved by solely examining the intentions of those involved. By adopting an insight from sociology and historiography, Komonchak contends that historical


agents never know in advance all the implications and consequences of their actions. Choices they make often do have consequences they never intended. Yet, in spite of that, it may be argued that they are the cause of the undesired effects. Komonchak points out that what from the point of view of theology appears as a reform, from the point of view of sociology may be something like a revolution, and he thinks that neither de Lubac nor Ratzinger take this sufficiently into consideration.\textsuperscript{31}

Third, still with regard to the responsibility for the collapse of pre-Vatican II Catholicism, Komonchak’s position is that Vatican II is in fact responsible for the collapse because it called into question some of the most important features of modern Roman Catholicism. Komonchak maintains that in three important ways the council called into question the logic of modern Roman Catholicism. The council offered a more nuanced and a more positive assessment of the modern world than had been typical before. This happened with particular force in the documents on the church in the modern world and on religious freedom. Through this the inner logic and dynamic of the modern Roman Catholicism, which stringently opposed the modern world, was compromised to the point that it could not sustain itself any longer. The council also called for a reform of church worship, devotion, and practice. This happened suddenly in a church which for a long time rejected this very idea. As mentioned above, calling for a reform may be theologically sound. Sociologically, however, it represented an interruption in the processes by which in everyone’s memory the church reproduced itself; it also called these processes into question. Komonchak points out that sociologically this is a dangerous thing to do. Lastly, the council called the local churches to achieve in their own places and culture their

realization of catholicy. This also constituted a break with modern Roman Catholicism’s insistence on centralization and uniformity, and it questioned the normativity of the European and especially Roman ways of realizing Catholicism. 32 These three decisions of Vatican II have had, according to Komonchak, a devastating effect on pre-Vatican II Catholicism.

Although Komonchak is usually on the side of the middle position, has worked out his own version of it, and considers the progressive and the traditionalist positions as one-sided, in the case of assigning the council responsibility for the collapse of the pre-Vatican II Catholicism, as was just shown, he agrees with progressives and traditionalists whom he thinks are correct in finding in the council itself a cause and explanation of many developments after the council. Komonchak makes a serious effort to understand the Catholicism which dissolved in the aftermath of Vatican II, and he believes that everyone who wants to say whether this dissolution was a good or a bad thing should likewise analyze what was lost. Komonchak’s issue with the progressives in this regard is that they do not show a willingness to understand and/or appreciate why pre-Vatican II Catholicism became what it was, nor are they willing to acknowledge that much about it was good and beautiful. As for the traditionalists, Komonchak believes that they make a mistake in considering modern Roman Catholicism as a timeless and necessary ideal. They are not able to conceive that in the nineteenth century the church could have responded differently to the challenges brought by the Enlightenment. Lastly, with regard to the middle position, particularly as this has been presented by Joseph Ratzinger, Komonchak thinks that it

leans too much in the traditionalist direction in the sense that it is fundamentally hostile to liberalism in culture and society.\textsuperscript{33}

B. Vatican II as an “Event”

The previous pages showed that Komonchak has approached the questions of interpreting the council by making a serious attempt at understanding pre-Vatican II Catholicism as well as by learning from and appropriating the insights of the social sciences. Komonchak’s logic for this has been grounded in his conviction that neither a judgment about the council’s responsibility for the collapse of the pre-Vatican II Catholicism nor an assessment of this collapse could be made without first studying the Catholicism which collapsed. At this point I will focus the discussion of Komonchak’s contribution to the field of Vatican II hermeneutics on the issue of Vatican II as an “event.”

For Komonchak, the differences among the interpretations of the progressives, the traditionalists, and the reformists depend heavily on what one means by “Vatican II,” particularly, whether one understands it to refer primarily to the council’s final documents or to the experience of the council. The progressives and the traditionalists focus mainly on the latter, whereas the reformists concentrate on the former. Komonchak argues, however, that the question of the meaning and interpretation of Vatican II cannot be resolved simply by appealing to its texts (letter) or to the experience of the council (spirit), but requires critical attention to a third category, that of Vatican II as an “event.”\textsuperscript{34} He argues his point primarily on historiographical grounds.

\textsuperscript{33} Komonchak, “Interpreting the Second Vatican Council,” 89–90.

\textsuperscript{34} Komonchak, “Vatican II as an ‘Event,’” 341. This article is the Fourth Annual Henri de Lubac lecture which Komonchak delivered at Saint Louis University on February 11, 1999.
Komonchak first worked out the distinction between “experience” and “event” in a presentation he gave at a symposium on Vatican II held in Bologna in December 1996. He explains that all three terms—event, experience, and final documents—appeared in the program of the symposium, but only two of them—event and final documents—appear in the proceedings which gathered the major papers delivered at the symposium. The omission of “experience” Komonchak considers an indication of his apparent failure to convince the participants, or perhaps just the editors of the proceedings, that the category “event” is not reducible to that of “experience.”

With the term “experience” Komonchak refers to the intentions, motives, encounters, decisions, and actions of the council participants. It naturally refers to what happened during Vatican II, which was more than the production of texts. Komonchak points out that it is difficult to speak of a single “experience” of the council except when the council fathers took official and collective action. The “experience” of Vatican II, for Komonchak, can be synonymous with the “spirit” of Vatican II. As products of that experience, the “final documents” survive as black marks on white paper. Unlike “experience,” which is part of the past and has to be reconstructed by the critical work of historians, they continue to have an objective and continued existence.


36. See Maria Teresa Fattori and Alberto Melloni, L’evento e le decisioni: Studi sulle dinamiche del concilio Vaticano II.


Differing from “experience,” the term “event” for Komonchak refers not to a simple occurrence of something, but to a noteworthy occurrence, one that has consequences. Komonchak notes that at present there has been a revival of this category among historians, and that they almost always assume that “an ‘event’ represents novelty, discontinuity, a ‘rupture,’ a break from routine, causing surprise, disturbance, even trauma, and perhaps initiating a new routine, a new realm of the taken-for-granted.” Komonchak refers to several historians who understand an event as an occurrence detached in one way or another from the whole set of repetitions and regularities that constitute the course of daily life. For them, an event is something that does not go without saying. It refers to sequences of occurrences which start with a rupture of some sort and which transform structures.

In Komonchak’s view, it seems clear and hardly in need of demonstration that Vatican II was an “event” in the sense just described. He is aware, however, that this understanding would meet objections from the proponents of the middle or the reformist position who do not accept that the council constituted a break or rupture with tradition. For them, the notion of Vatican II’s discontinuity with tradition has been exaggerated by both the progressives and the traditionalists, and they think that it can be asserted only at the expense of ignoring the texts of the council. For Joseph Ratzinger, with whom Komonchak seems to be primarily in conversation from among the reformists, the notion of

39. Ibid., 339.


42. Ibid., 340.
before and after in the history of the Church, wholly unjustified by the documents of Vatican II, which do nothing but reaffirm the continuity of Catholicism, must be decidedly opposed. There is no “pre-“ or “post”-conciliar Church; there is but one, unique Church that walks the path toward the Lord, ever deepening and ever better understanding the treasure of faith that he himself has entrusted to her. There are no leaps in this history, there are no fractures, and there is no break in continuity. In no wise did the Council intend to introduce a temporal dichotomy in the Church.  

Komonchak considers Ratzinger’s position as largely theological and focused on the fidelity of Vatican II’s texts to tradition. What Komonchak finds lacking is an engagement with what social sciences have to say with regard to the interpretation of history.  

In Komonchak’s understanding, the judgment about whether Vatican II was an “event,” that is, a rupture, cannot be based exclusively on the experiences, intentions, or motives of the council’s protagonists. These are only a part of the judgment that needs to be made. This judgment, for Komonchak “is a historical judgment, which means that it is a historian’s judgment.” Furthermore, appropriating the insights of historians such as Paul Veyne, Carl Becker, and Lucien Febvre, Komonchak explains that from the historian’s perspective “an event makes sense only within a story.” In this understanding, an event is an episode within a plot. The overall story and its plot determine what will count as an event, and changing the story and the plot will also change which occurrences will be seen as events. Thus, the timeline is fundamental for any story. This insight is significant for Komonchak because he thinks that different understandings of the council will ensue if the council is placed at the beginning, in the

45. Ibid., 344.
middle, or at the end of the story one wants to tell. With regard to the council documents, Komonchak thinks that different time-lines are appropriate for different texts in terms of what constitutes their beginning, and he denies that the dates of the texts’ promulgation should be the end of the story. Rather, their reception should also be part of the timeline.47

Komonchak thinks that there is sufficient data to warrant his claim that Vatican II constituted an “event.” He points out that the very announcement of the council, which was met with both hope and fear, was a surprise and a break with normal life of the church.48 He notes further that during the first session of the council there were several dramatic moments such as the pope’s opening speech,49 the postponement of the election of conciliar commissions,50 and the severe criticism of the schema De fontibus and its removal from the conciliar agenda.51


49. For instance, in the opening speech of the council (October 11, 1962) the pope was critical of the “prophets of doom” who could see only the “darkness burdening the face of the earth.” It is believed that he was referring to some of the cardinals from the Roman curia. See John XXIII, Gaudet Mater Ecclesia, in Council Daybook, vol. 1, 25–29.

50. After the council opened one of the first things the conciliar fathers focused on was the selection of the commissions for the work of the council. At the initiative of some European cardinals such as Achille Liénart (France) and Joseph Frings (Germany) a request was made on October 13 that the elections to the commissions scheduled for that day be postponed until the conciliar fathers got to know each other. Those who supported this delay wanted to prevent the commissions from being staffed by those whose names were chosen by the preparatory commissions for the council in which members of the curia exercised significant influence. As a result of the delay many members of the preparatory commissions were not elected to the conciliar commissions. See Andrea Riccardi, “The Tumultuous Opening Days of the Council,” in History of Vatican II, vol. 2, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 1–67, at 26–32.

51. De fontibus revelationis was the draft document which treated the subject of divine revelation. When it was discussed at the first session of the council (November 14–20, 1962) many objections were raised such as that the document was overly negative in its tone, too tied to neo-scholastic theology, and dismissive toward the recent work on the relation of scripture and tradition. As a result of a vote (November 20, 1962) and John XXIII’s intervention, De fontibus was withdrawn and the drafting of a new document, which eventually became Dei Verbum, was initiated. See Giuseppe Ruggieri, “The First Doctrinal Clash,” in History of Vatican II, vol. 2, 233–66.
These data clearly represent a break with routine. In addition, from what the contemporaries had written about the council when they referred to it as the end of the Counter-Reformation or of the Tridentine era, the end of the Middle Ages, even the end of the Constantinian era, it is clear that they sensed that something new and unusual was taking place. This is true also about the post-conciliar period.  

Komonchak agrees with the reformist position that appeals of the progressives to the “spirit of Vatican II” need to be controlled by the actual texts of the council, which are what the council participants agreed to say. But this is not an easy task, as if the final texts provided a straightforward answer to what the council did. The full meaning of these texts, for Komonchak, can often be determined only when they are situated within their redactional history. When this is done, one can see that the differences between the officially prepared drafts for the council and the final texts are significant enough to speak of break or discontinuity. He illustrates this with the example of Dei verbum. One way to understand this document is to start with its original draft De fontibus prepared for the first session of the council, and then ask how it happened that the council, which was for the most part expected to say what was in the original draft, said in the end what is in Dei verbum. Another way is to start in the decades prior to the council,


53. With “redactional history” I refer to the editorial process that took place from the first draft—what a document would have said if no changes to it were made—to the final version of the document.


55. For instance, based on its title De fontibus revelationis (“On the sources of revelation), the heading of its first chapter De duplici fonte revelationis (“On the double-source of revelation”) and the text of paragraph 4, the council was supposed to say that Scripture and Tradition constitute two sources of revelation. This two-source theology of revelation, however, is not present in the final text of Dei verbum. Instead, one reads there that Scripture and Tradition flow out from the same divine wellspring, that they are bound closely together, communicate with each other, and move toward the same goal (See Dei verbum 9). Nowhere in Dei verbum are Scripture and Tradition presented as two sources of revelation.
which witnessed the rise of historical criticism of the Bible, its initial opposition by the Magisterium,\textsuperscript{56} and a first step towards its acceptance in the encyclical \textit{Divino afflante Spiritu} of Pius XII (1943), and then to continue from \textit{De fontibus} to \textit{Dei verbum}. In both of these two ways Komonchak thinks that the conclusion seems clear that \textit{Dei verbum} “intended to do something other than simply ‘reaffirm the continuity of Catholicism.’”\textsuperscript{57}

Komonchak’s article “Benedict XVI and the Interpretation of Vatican II” belongs to one of his most recent engagements with the topic of the interpretation of the council.\textsuperscript{58} The article analyses the Christmas address of the pope delivered to the Roman curia on December 22, 2005. In it the pope took up the issue of the interpretation of the Second Vatican Council. From his analysis of the pope’s address one could conclude that Komonchak does not consider the pope’s proposal to interpret the council through the lens of the “hermeneutic of reform” to be in conflict with his own view that Vatican II constituted an “event.”

The immediate context for the Pope’s address was the fortieth anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council. As part of the larger context, it should be noted that in 2005 a collection of essays by Italian Archbishop Agostino Marchetto was published, in which he was severely critical of the five-volume \textit{History of Vatican II} produced by the so-called “Bologna


\textsuperscript{57} Komonchak, “Vatican II as an ‘Event,’” 342.

\textsuperscript{58} The full bibliographical data for this article are given in footnote 2. “Novelty in Continuity” is a popular version of this article.
school”\textsuperscript{59} and edited by Giuseppe Alberigo.\textsuperscript{60} Komonchak was part of this project both as a contributor and as a general editor of the English-language series. Among the criticisms Marchetto raised against the \textit{History of Vatican II} was that it interprets the council too much in terms of discontinuity and rupture. Upon the election of Joseph Ratzinger to the papacy, there were high expectations that he would address the issue of the interpretation of Vatican II and criticize the approach of the “Bologna school” by taking the side of its critics.

The pope indeed addressed the issue shortly after his election in the aforementioned address to the Roman curia. He argued that in vast areas of the church the implementation of the council has been difficult because two contrary hermeneutics came face-to-face and quarreled with each other. In the pope’s view, one of them caused confusion and the other has been bearing fruit silently but more and more visibly. The Pope called the former hermeneutic a hermeneutic of discontinuity or rupture and the latter a hermeneutic of reform.\textsuperscript{61}

The pope expressed displeasure with the hermeneutic of discontinuity or rupture. He claimed that it

risks ending in a split between the preconciliar and the postconciliar church. It asserts that the texts of the council as such do not yet express the true spirit of the council. It

\textsuperscript{59} This term refers to the Institute for the Study of Religion at the University of Bologna, Italy. The institute was founded by Giuseppe Dossetti (1913–1996), a priest of the archdiocese of Bologna, personal theological adviser of the archbishop of Bologna Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro (1891–1976), and a \textit{peritus} at Vatican II. The institute specializes in the history of the Second Vatican Council. One of its most significant achievements so far is the five-volume history of Vatican II referenced in this chapter. The leading minds of the school have been Giuseppe Alberigo and Alberto Melloni. The school has been criticized, however, for promoting the so-called hermeneutic of rupture or discontinuity with regard to Vatican II. Among its critics have been such figures as Walter Brandmüller, Roberto de Mattei, Joseph Ratzinger, and Agostino Marchetto.


claims that they are the result of compromises . . . However, the true spirit of the council is not to be found in these compromises but instead in the impulses toward the new that are contained in the texts. . . . Precisely because the texts would only imperfectly reflect the true spirit of the council and its newness, it would be necessary to go courageously beyond the texts and make room for the newness in which the council’s deepest intention would be expressed . . . 62

The pope claimed that this hermeneutic misunderstands the nature of the council and proposed the hermeneutic of reform to counteract it.

The pope illustrated his notion of the hermeneutic of reform by referring to three sets of questions, which he considered to have been pressing upon the church at the time of Vatican II. The first two concerned the relationship between faith and modern science, and between the church and the modern state, and the third had to do with the problem of religious tolerance. 63

With regard to these three concerns the pope stated:

It is clear that in all these sectors, which together form a single problem, some kind of discontinuity might emerge. Indeed, a discontinuity had been revealed but in which, after the various distinctions between concrete historical situations and their requirements had been made, the continuity of principles proved not to have been abandoned. It is easy to miss this fact at a first glance.

It is precisely in this combination of continuity and discontinuity at different levels that the very nature of true reform consists. 64

The pope then further illustrated this point on the issue of religious freedom. Since he acknowledged that his hermeneutics of reform contains not only continuity but also discontinuity—even though at different levels—it should be evident that his hermeneutic of reform is not in inverse relation to the hermeneutics of discontinuity.

62. Ibid., 536.
63. Ibid., 536–37.
64. Ibid., 538.
Komonchak finds it strange that the pope sets up the dichotomy between these two hermeneutics. He thinks that the pope might have better contrasted the hermeneutics of discontinuity with that of continuity or fidelity, and similarly the hermeneutics of reform with that of revolution. Instead the tension was set up between discontinuity and reform. But Komonchak observes that no necessary tension exists there since any genuine reform requires some discontinuity. In the absence of change one cannot speak of reform. The pope himself affirmed this point when he said that the true reform consists in a combination of continuity and discontinuity. Thus, Komonchak concludes that based on the pope’s address “a hermeneutics of discontinuity need not see rupture everywhere; and a hermeneutics of reform, it turns out, acknowledges some important discontinuities.”

Komonchak also understands the pope’s speech as in no way repudiating the History of Vatican II in which he was involved. He suggests, rather, that the pope’s choice of religious freedom as the key illustration for his hermeneutics of reform indicates that the main target of the pope’s speech was the Society of St. Pius X—a group of Catholic traditionalists that rejected the council. The teaching on religious liberty has been among the chief reasons for their opposition to Vatican II. Ever since they entered into formal schism in 1988, when their founder, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, illicitly ordained four bishops, the Vatican has been making significant attempts to overcome the schism.

66. Ibid., 335; “Novelty in Continuity,” 13.
Komonchak explains that the issue of continuity or discontinuity can be examined from different standpoints—doctrinal, theological, sociological, and historical. From a doctrinal standpoint, he sees a clear continuity of Vatican II with tradition. The council neither discarded nor promulgated any dogmas, although it did recover some doctrines which had been neglected in recent centuries. He gives the examples of the collegiality of bishops, the priesthood of all the baptized, the theology of the local church, and the importance of Scripture. From the theological standpoint, Komonchak notes that Vatican II was the fruit of the renewal movements (biblical, patristic, liturgical, and ecumenical). In the decades prior to the council these movements and theologists associated with them were viewed at times with disapproval and suspicion by the Magisterium, which was reflected in the schemas prepared for the council by the Roman curia. At the first session of the council, however, these texts were generally met with disapproval from the majority of the council fathers.\textsuperscript{68} The leadership of the council hitherto in the hands of the curial bishops and those who thought alike became available also to bishops who were open to the renewal advocated by the theologians associated with the biblical, patristic, liturgical, and ecumenical movements.\textsuperscript{69} Some theologians who were till then viewed with suspicion by the Vatican were made official conciliar experts.\textsuperscript{70} In this, Komonchak sees considerable discontinuity. He affirms the same from the sociological or historical standpoint, from which Vatican II was experienced as an event—a break with routine.\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{68} E.g. the schemas on divine revelation (\textit{De fontibus revelationis}) and on the church (\textit{De Ecclesia}).


\textsuperscript{70} For instance, Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar, and John Courtney Murray.

This concludes the first part of this chapter where I have discussed Joseph Komonchak’s contribution to the interpretation of the Second Vatican Council. I have presented his *alternative middle position* on the conciliar hermeneutics and contrasted it with three other views—*progressive, traditionalist, and middle*. I have shown that central to Komonchak’s position are the concerns with regard to the responsibility of Vatican II for the collapse of pre-Vatican II Catholicism, the continuity and discontinuity of Vatican II with the tradition of the church, and the dynamic between the “letter” and the “spirit” of the council.

3.2. **VATICAN II AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR ECCLESIOLOGY**

After discussing Komonchak’s contribution to the interpretation of Vatican II, I will now focus on his understanding of the significance of Vatican II for ecclesiology. First I want to note that although the topic of Vatican II’s ecclesiology is central to Komonchak’s theological project and is always at least in the background of his theologizing, he has dedicated significantly less space exclusively to the question of the ecclesiology of Vatican II than to the interpretation of the council or to the theology of the local church.⁷² The reason appears to be in Komonchak’s hesitation to treat a very large and complex topic in the short space of single articles. He considers such a task difficult, even impossible.⁷³ Thus, the goal in this section of the chapter will not be to engage Komonchak’s entire corpus of writings and examine everything he explicitly or implicitly states with regard to the council’s ecclesiology. This would require space comparable to this whole study. Instead, the focus will be on the writings which treat the topic

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of Vatican II’s ecclesiology explicitly and these will be examined in order to determine how Komonchak understands the significance of Vatican II for ecclesiology.

In Komonchak’s view, Vatican II did not provide “a fully coherent, systematic and comprehensive ecclesiology,” nor would it be realistic to expect one from a council. The reason for this is that Vatican II followed a long-standing conciliar practice according to which the bishops strive to achieve the greatest consensus possible, and when this takes place in conditions of freedom, it is viewed as the work of the Holy Spirit. The essential part of this approach is that the final texts often contain statements of compromise which do not settle legitimately disputed issues, but rather state what all can accept. Komonchak considers this to be the case with Vatican II’s ecclesiology where, on several issues—such as the relationship between primacy and collegiality, between the universal church and the particular churches, between clergy and laity, between church and world, and regarding the authority of episcopal conferences—the final texts simply set forth the elements that must be kept together, at times in tension, though the issues as such remain unresolved. Komonchak thinks that it needs to be acknowledged that in the post-conciliar era the church has been living with the consequences of this approach, and he does not think that much progress has been made on these issues in this timeframe.

For Komonchak, Vatican II reconfigured the landscape of Catholic ecclesiology in several respects. First, with regard to its treatment of the nature of the church, the council recovered the inner, spiritual substance of the church, which was not adequately articulated in the

74. Ibid.

75. Ibid., 767–68; “The Significance of Vatican Council II for Ecclesiology,” 75–76.
ecclesiological manuals prior to Vatican II. In the first two chapters of *Lumen gentium*, the council provided a theological description of the mystery of the church as it originates in the life of the Trinity and as it journeys toward the consummation of history. It spoke about the church in various images such as Body of Christ, pilgrim People of God, and sacrament. Both *Lumen gentium* and *Sacrosanctum Concilium* affirmed the eucharistic character of the church. As particularly important, Komonchak considers the statement in *Lumen gentium* 8, which insists that the church is but one reality constituted by a divine and a human element. Throughout his writings, he emphasizes this point as central to the council’s understanding of the church.

Second, Komonchak sees significance in the council’s treatment of what it means to belong to the church. Post-Tridentine ecclesiology approached this question in the language of juridical membership. It identified the members of the church and then concluded that the church is where they are. This was the method of Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621) and it prevailed in Catholic ecclesiology through Pius XII’s encyclical *Mystici corporis* (1943) as well as through the schema *De Ecclesia*. Komonchak notes that for the reason of clarity as well as for apologetic purposes Bellarmine’s criteria for the membership in the church—the external profession of faith, communion in the sacraments, and subordination to proper authority—were external and minimalistic. They gave only a small attention to the internal considerations of


77. See Komonchak, “Towards a Theology of the Local Church,” 3. For more see chapter 4, pp. 111–12.

78. See *Mystici corporis* 22: “Actually only those are to be included as members of the Church who have been baptized and profess the true faith, and who have not been so unfortunate as to separate themselves from the unity of the Body, or been excluded by legitimate authority for grave faults committed. . . . It follows that those who are divided in faith or government cannot be living in the unity of such a Body, nor can they be living the life of its one Divine Spirit.” Claudia Carlen, ed., *The Papal Encyclicals 1939–1958* (Wilmington, NC: McGrath Publishing Company, 1981), 37–63, at 41.
membership. Consequently, for Bellarmine, only Catholics were the true members of the church because only they fulfilled all three criteria. Vatican II, however, did not adopt this approach because it found the language of membership too confining. As Komonchak explains, the language of membership was insufficient to express the council’s notion of the church as a mystery of communion. The council rather used the language of degrees of incorporation since, unlike the language of membership, it could account for the council’s affirmations that many elements of the church exist in other Christian churches and communities, \(^79\) as well as for the reality that the communion characteristic of the church of Christ exceeds the boundaries of the Catholic Church. \(^80\)

In this broadening of ecclesial belonging Komonchak locates the reason that led the council to nuance the simple identification of the Roman Catholic Church with the church of Christ hitherto operative in Catholic ecclesiology. \(^81\) Instead of such a simple identification the council said that the church of Christ “subsists” in the Catholic Church. \(^82\) Following the

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\(^79\) Cf. \textit{Lumen gentium} 8.


\(^81\) E.g. in the encyclical \textit{Mystici corporis} 13 (Pius XII, 1943) it says: “If we would define and describe this true Church of Jesus Christ—which is the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church—we shall find nothing more noble, more sublime, or more divine than the expression ‘the Mystical Body of Christ’ . . .” (Carlen, \textit{The Papal Encyclicals}, 39). In the first draft of \textit{Lumen gentium} (\textit{De Ecclesia} 1962) it says: “The Roman Catholic Church is the Mystical Body of Christ . . . and only the one that is Roman Catholic has the right to be called Church” (\textit{AS} 1/4: 15).

\(^82\) “Haec est unica Christi ecclesia, quam in symbolo unam, sanctam, catholicae et apostolicam profitemur . . . Haec ecclesia, in hoc mundo ut societas constituta et ordinata, subsistit in ecclesia catholica, a successor Petro et episcopis in eius communione gubernata, licet extra eius compagnem elementa plura sanctificationis et veritatis inveniatur . . .” “This is the sole Church of Christ which in the Creed we profess to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic . . . This Church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him. Nevertheless, many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside its visible confines . . .” (\textit{Lumen gentium} 8).
explanation of the council’s doctrinal commission, Komonchak understands the shift from *is* in the initial schema to *subsistit in* in *Lumen gentium* 8 to be more appropriate to the council’s recognition of the existence of the elements of the church outside of the Catholic Church. Referring to article 3 of the Decree on Ecumenism, he understands the claim that the church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church to mean that in the Catholic Church *alone* can be found the fullness of the means of salvation.  

Third, as another significant feature of Vatican II’s ecclesiology Komonchak counts the council’s recovery of the theology of the local church. Since this question was the topic of the previous chapter, and since chapter five of this study will treat in detail Komonchak’s contribution to the theology of the local church, to avoid unnecessary repetition I will provide here only a short summary statement. Komonchak locates Vatican II’s significance for the theology of the local church in its move away from conceiving local churches as administrative subdivisions of a pre-existent universal church. He understands the council as affirming that the relationship between the local churches and the universal church is that of reciprocal or mutual inclusion. The local churches exist only in the one church, and the one church exists only as the many churches.  

Fourth, Vatican II also reconfigured the landscape of Catholic ecclesiology by the attention it gave to the laity. In Komonchak’s view, the council rehabilitated the place and the role of the laity in the church. The pre-conciliar ecclesiology did not say much about the laity, whom it defined as all the baptized except for the clergy and the religious. Komonchak explains

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that in several ways Vatican II overcame this neglect by, among other things, describing the laity as baptized believers who in their own way share in the office of Christ as a priest, prophet, and king, and who have their own part to play in the church and in the world (*Lumen gentium* 31); by affirming the common dignity among believers, which derives from their rebirth in baptism, and which excludes inequalities based on race, nationality, social conditions, and sex (*Lumen gentium* 32); and by speaking about the laity as the recipients of the special gifts of the Spirit which they have a right and duty to exercise in the church and in the world (*Apostolicam actuositatem* 3). For Komonchak, the acknowledgement of the place and the role of the laity in the church is a corollary of Vatican II’s endorsement of the achievements of the liturgical movement. In its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the council affirmed that it is the whole community of faith that is the subject or agent of worship, and consequently, the laity should not be merely passive recipients or observers of liturgical actions performed by the ordained (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 14).

Fifth, according to Komonchak, the council made a significant contribution to ecclesiology in its treatment of the relation between the church and the world in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*. Komonchak attributes significance to the fact that the council entered into *dialogue with* the modern world, rather than undertaking a generic discussion of the world. After noting that criticisms of the council’s ambiguous notion of *the world* were raised both during the drafting of *Gaudium et spes* as well as after the council’s close, Komonchak suggests that *the world* here refers to “what human

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beings have made, are making and will make by the use of their freedom.”

By addressing the relationship between the church and the modern world, *Gaudium et Spes* was addressing the relationship between the church “and the historic project of human self-responsibility and self-realization.” For Komonchak, this world is perhaps less “the theater of human history” (*Gaudium et spes* 2) than “the drama of human history.” While the former designation suggests that “the world” is a physical space where something happens, namely, the human project, the latter designation suggests that it is the human project itself which is the referent of the term “the world.” Komonchak opts for the second designation, for it is more anthropological and thus more adequately theological.

Komonchak considers *Gaudium et spes* significant for ecclesiology in two further respects. The first one is with regard to what he calls “ecclesiology as lived,” by which he refers to the basic attitudes and strategies that define the church’s activity in the world. In this regard, in *Gaudium et spes* the council largely refrained from the suspicious, negative, and defensive attitude toward the modern world which was characteristic of pre-Vatican II Catholicism. Instead the bishops adopted a method of dialogue based on the judgment that God is not absent from modern developments, and were even willing to say that the church can learn from the world (*Gaudium et spes* 44). Komonchak does not think that the council’s treatment

87. Ibid.
88. Ibid. See also “Concepts of Communion,” 333.
90. Ibid.
of the relation of the church and the world in *Gaudium et spes* is naively optimistic. For him, *Gaudium et spes*

does not refrain from often quite critical remarks on imbalances and failures in the modern world and on the mistaken views of God and of humans that frequently lie behind them. But its response was a positive and confident statement of what the Church has to offer both through its message about Christ and through its own life of faith, hope and love.  

A second one is on the level of what Komonchak calls “reflective ecclesiology,” by which he means the method and teaching of *Gaudium et spes* require that an ecclesiology incorporate, but not simply as an appendix, a consideration of the church in the world. As a matter of course, for Komonchak, an ecclesiology must consider the formal principles of the church, that is, the principles that make the church a theological reality. But an ecclesiology must also, Komonchak argues, consider the particular places, times, and historical challenges because the church is never generated apart from them but in their midst. In Komonchak’s understanding, “the genesis of the Church is a moment in, a dimension of, the genesis of the world,” and the church’s very existence “is supposed to make the world different.”

3.3. CONCLUSION

This chapter examined Joseph Komonchak’s interpretation of the Second Vatican Council and his understanding of the significance of Vatican II for ecclesiology. It was shown that Komonchak understands the council in positive terms, even as he acknowledges that the

91. Ibid.
92. Ibid., 90.
93. Ibid.
church has experienced many difficulties in its aftermath. There is general agreement that these difficulties have been symptomatic of the lack of consensus about the meaning of the council.

Komonchak has been in conversation with three views of Vatican II hermeneutics—the progressive view, the traditionalist view, and the middle or reformist view. While he sees value in each of these positions, Komonchak has not endorsed any of them in toto, rather, he developed a nuanced version of the middle view, which he calls *an alternative middle position*. The issues of Vatican II hermeneutics to which Komonchak has paid most attention are: (1) the responsibility of the council for the collapse of pre-Vatican II Catholicism; (2) the continuity and discontinuity of Vatican II with the tradition of the church; and (3) the dynamics between the “letter” and the “spirit” of the council.

With regard to the question of whether Vatican II is responsible for the dissolution of pre-Vatican II Catholicism, Komonchak answers in the affirmative. In his understanding, the council called into question some of the most important principles of the pre-Vatican II Catholicism, which had a devastating effect on it. The key to Komonchak’s view is to distinguish between the council’s theological labors and their sociological effects. Theologically the council wanted nothing more than a legitimate reform of the church. Sociologically, however, this often caused something like a revolution in Catholicism. This last insight distinguishes Komonchak’s middle position from the reformists who do not consider the council to be responsible for the dissolution of pre-Vatican II Catholicism.

As for the issue of continuity and discontinuity of the council with tradition, Komonchak affirms both, continuity and discontinuity. From historiography, Komonchak appropriated the notion of “event,” through which he approached this issue. An “event” for Komonchak is not
just any occurrence but a noteworthy occurrence, one that represents novelty, break from routine, even discontinuity. Komonchak believes that Vatican II was an event in this sense. He also believes that the issue of continuity or discontinuity can be examined from different standpoints. From the standpoint of dogma, Komonchak does not see any discontinuity of Vatican II with tradition. From the theological and sociological standpoints, however, he affirms some discontinuity.

With regard to the dynamics between the role of the “letter” and the “spirit” of the council in understanding Vatican II, Komonchak agrees with the middle position that the spirit of Vatican II needs to be controlled by the letter of its final documents. But for him, the documents can often be understood only against the background of their editorial history—a point not sufficiently acknowledged by the reformists. Komonchak suggests that one way to understand the “letter” of Vatican II is to compare and contrast the documents which were prepared for the first session of the council, and which the council was expected to confirm, with the final texts of the council. One would undoubtedly find many instances of continuity and discontinuity between them.

After a discussion of Komonchak’s interpretation of Vatican II, the chapter presented his understanding of the significance of the council for ecclesiology. The case was made that in several respects Komonchak understands Vatican II as reconfiguring the landscape of Catholic ecclesiology. First, in its treatment of the nature of the church, Vatican II retrieved the inner, spiritual nature of the church which was neglected in ecclesiology prior to the council. Second, Vatican II broadened the understanding of what it means to belong to the church by acknowledging that many elements of church exist in the non-Catholic churches and ecclesial
communities, and that the boundaries of the church reach beyond the Catholic Church. Third, the council recovered the theology of the local church. Fourth, the council rehabilitated the place and the role of the laity in the church. Lastly, the council entered into dialogue with the modern world—something that many Catholics had opposed for over a century.

In the following chapter I will examine the foundations for Komonchak’s ecclesiology as a whole and for the theology of the local church in particular. The focus will be on his method in ecclesiology.

CHAPTER 4
Joseph A. Komonchak and Method in Ecclesiology

The question of method lies at the center and belongs to the foundations of the discipline of theology. It refers to the way theologians go about making their claims. It is the means of arriving at an interpretation. As Roger Haight explains:

Method involves the premises and presuppositions of a theologian’s position. Method concerns the starting point and the elementary data the theologian appeals to in taking a position. Method includes the logic, the kind of argument and its coherence, through which the theologian understands experience. In other words, a theologian’s method generates the position he or she takes, so that beneath every position taken lies the method that generated the position.¹

Yet, method is not something mechanical and by itself it does not absolutely predetermine one’s position. Two theologians who employ similar methods can arrive at different conclusions.

In spite of the centrality and importance of method, there is no one method that theologians agree on and follow in their investigations. A non-specialist might find it surprising that theologians do not share a set of common presuppositions and working principles. Theology, in fact, is a discipline of many methods. Pluralism with regard to method in theology is a fact.²

The study of method in ecclesiology is one of Joseph A. Komonchak’s most important contributions to ecclesiology. Several of his most influential writings deal with this subject


explicitly and it also plays a prominent role in his articles on the topic of the local church. In fact, one is left with the impression that methodological issues in ecclesiology are never absent from his thought. ³

There are several reasons why methodological issues in ecclesiology have played such a prominent role in Komonchak’s ecclesiology in general and in his theology of the local church in particular. First, Komonchak is convinced that method in ecclesiology is a rather neglected topic, in part because ecclesiology has often played an ideological role. The doctrine of the church, especially as it pertains to ordained and Petrine ministries, has functioned as an insurmountable obstacle in the divisions of Western Christianity. Second, the remarkable interest in the subject of the local church after Vatican II, in contrast to its wide neglect in the period which preceded it, needs an explanation as well as a validation of such a development. Third, the subject of method in ecclesiology has played a robust role in Komonchak’s ecclesiology because he needed to ground one of the key claims of his theology of the local church, namely, that ecclesiological reflection should begin with and center upon the local

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church. In addition to these three reasons, which Komonchak himself provides, it may be noted that theology in 1970s and 1980s was marked by an extensive discussion of method, as reflected in authors such as Bernard Lonergan, David Tracy, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and George Lindbeck.

This chapter will discuss Komonchak’s contribution to method in ecclesiology and how it impacts his theology of the local church. The chapter will consist of four sections. Section one will outline the context for Komonchak’s engagement with methodological issues in ecclesiology. Section two will discuss the issue which Komonchak considers the central problem in ecclesiology, namely, how to understand the church as one reality having two dimensions—divine and human. Sections three and four lay out Komonchak’s answer to this central problem. Section three will outline Komonchak’s vision of method for ecclesiology in general. This section will identify the methodological categories Komonchak developed in order to engage the central issue in ecclesiology in a critical and systematic manner. Section four will provide the methodological grounding for Komonchak’s insistence that ecclesiology ought to begin with and focus on the theology of the local church. The chapter will be expository and descriptive in nature. Its purpose is to set up foundations for Komonchak’s theology of the local church which will be presented in the next chapter.


4.1. **VATICAN II AND THE SHIFT IN ECCLESIOLOGY**

Komonchak’s engagement with methodological issues in ecclesiology has stemmed from his reservation about some developments in ecclesiology after the Second Vatican Council. Komonchak argues that Vatican II introduced a shift in Catholic ecclesiology.\(^6\) This shift can be traced to conciliar debates over the council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, but its roots go deeper, namely, to the renewal in Catholic ecclesiology in the decades prior to Vatican II. As Komonchak has pointed out, after Vatican II it became evident that one could not continue to do ecclesiology in the style of the preconciliar manuals, though an agreement as to what should replace them was lacking.\(^7\)

In the Counter-Reformation period and especially after Vatican I the dominant approach in Catholic ecclesiology concentrated on the church’s institutional elements. The church was defined as a *societas perfecta inaequalium*. On this understanding the church was considered to be self-sufficient and autonomous from the civil society, possessing all the necessary means to attain its end. It was also considered to be a society of non-equals, divided into the clergy, the religious, and the laity. This classical ecclesiology, Komonchak explains, “concentrated on the legitimation and articulation of authority in the Church.”\(^8\) This approach was one sided, not doing justice to the reality of the church as described in the Scriptures and the tradition. To balance it, some ecclesiologists in the nineteenth century (e.g., Möhler and Newman) and especially in the first half of the twentieth century began to complement it with spiritual,

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liturgical, and communal approaches, which they recovered through the study of the patristic and early medieval sources. Tensions between these two approaches dominated the debates at Vatican II over *Lumen gentium*.9

The initial draft of the document on the church prepared for the conciliar deliberation by the Preparatory Theological Commission reflected almost entirely the classical approach. This draft was criticized severely at the first session of the council (December 1–7, 1962).10 It was perhaps the speech of Bishop Émil-Joseph de Smedt of Bruges (Belgium) that most aptly expressed the most significant shortcomings of this draft, according to many bishops. De Smedt denounced the draft for its triumphalism, clericalism, and juridicism.11 As a result of the criticisms the draft was withdrawn and a second draft document on the church was prepared by Gérard Philips,12 in which an attempt was made to displace the classical ecclesiology by assigning a prominent place, at least in the first two chapters, to such descriptions of the church as mystery or sacrament, the People of God, the Body of Christ, and as communion. By introducing these spiritual, liturgical, and communal dimensions to their description of the church, the drafters of the second schema on the church responded to the critics of the original document. These recovered approaches were welcomed by the council fathers and became the trademark of *Lumen gentium* and other Vatican II documents.


10. The original Latin text of this draft can be found in AS 1/4: 12–91.


12. Msgr. Gérard Philips (1899–1972) was a priest of the diocese of Liège (Belgium) and a professor of theology at the University of Louvain. At Vatican II he was a *peritus* and an adjunct secretary of the council’s Theological Commission.
After the council, in reaction to the viewpoint of the preconciliar manuals, and following the lead of *Lumen gentium*, many ecclesiologists showed preference for the more spiritual approaches and the institutional approach was rejected as an integrating model. These new approaches worked out specifically theological views of the church and began to accentuate the church’s transcendent, spiritual dimensions. An emphasis was placed on what makes the church different from other human communities.¹³

Although acknowledging that the recovery of the neglected dimensions of the church was a significant gain, Komonchak does not think that the shift from the classical to the newer ecclesiologies was a happy move in all respects because the new ecclesiologies left underdeveloped the relationship between the transcendent and spiritual dimensions of the church and the concrete communities of believers.¹⁴ His reservation has been that “not a great deal of effort was made to show how the remarkable biblical, traditional or theological language was true of the very human groups which gathered as the Church of Christ.”¹⁵ Komonchak does not think that the models of the church such as People of God, sacrament, communion, herald, or servant, which became prominent after the council and with which ecclesiologists attempted to displace the predominant pre-Vatican II model of the church as *societas perfecta*, “have

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adequately engaged the problem posed by the Council’s restatement of the Church’s central self-understanding.”

Komonchak is referring to a passage in *Lumen gentium* 8:

> The one mediator, Christ, established and ever sustains here on earth his holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as a visible organization through which he communicates truth and grace to all men. But, the society structured with hierarchical organs and the mystical body of Christ, the visible society and the spiritual community, the earthly Church and the Church endowed with heavenly riches, are not to be thought of as two realities. On the contrary, they form one complex reality which comes together from a human and a divine element. For this reason the Church is compared, in a powerful analogy, to the mystery of the incarnate Word. As the assumed nature, inseparably united to him, serves the divine Word as a living organ of salvation, so, in a somewhat similar way, does the social structure of the Church serve the Spirit of Christ who vivifies it, in the building up of the body.

This text from Vatican II affirms that the church is one reality constituted by a divine and a human element. Komonchak finds it regrettable, however, that “apart from the brief analogy to the Incarnation . . . the Council does not offer any theological explanation of how one is to understand how two remarkably different sets of descriptions can refer to the single reality called ‘the Church.’” One could interpret Komonchak’s own ecclesiological project as an attempt to offer such an explanation.

4.2. **THE CENTRAL PROBLEM FOR ECCLESIOLOGY**

In the middle of the 1980s, two decades after the close of the Second Vatican Council, Komonchak wrote that with regard to the implementation of the Second Vatican Council, Catholics had not yet attained “a high level of integration either in ecclesiology or in church practice.” He thought that one reason for this was a widely-held position, reflected also by the

16. Ibid., 3.

17. Ibid.

1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, according to which one had either to perceive the church “as something that we make, something that is ours,” or to perceive it “as something that we receive from God.”

For Komonchak, this either/or approach was not a genuine option for a Catholic ecclesiology. He saw the council’s approach articulated in *Lumen gentium* 8 as much more balanced and more in line with the Catholic both/and view of things.

In the *Preface* to his *Foundations in Ecclesiology* Komonchak reveals how he came to the realization of what constitutes the central problem for contemporary ecclesiology. He writes:

> Over several years I became convinced that one of the chief challenges was to bridge the gap between the lofty theological language which the Council restored to the center of ecclesiology and the concrete reality of the Church as realized in communities of believers.

Influenced by a number of theological voices, Komonchak started to conceive the real task of ecclesiology as an attempt to understand “how the quite human could be the locus of the quite transcendent.” In other words, Komonchak came to the realization that the central problem for ecclesiology was how to understand the church as one reality having two dimensions—divine and human.

Komonchak writes that Protestant scholars such as Claude Welch, James Gustafson, and John Knox helped him identify this central ecclesiological problem and offered important insights with regard to its solution. He sees their works as a reaction to “a nearly exclusive emphasis on the invisible and divine elements of the Church,” and as an attempt “to rehabilitate

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21. Ibid., viii.

the created reality of the human community of the Church.” Komonchak points out that during the same time period—the second half of the twentieth century—“most Catholic ecclesiologists seemed to be moving in the opposite direction” of emphasizing the church’s transcendent and spiritual dimensions while leaving the connection between these dimensions and the concrete communities of believers unarticulated. Komonchak considers the importance of these Protestant theologians to be their “serious attempts to explore theologically the human and sociological aspects of the Church.” Conceiving the church as a human and social reality would become an important part of Komonchak’s ecclesiology as well.

In the work of Claude Welch and John Knox, Komonchak found a good articulation of the human reality of the church. Welch raised objections against that ecclesiological one-sidedness in which the church is treated as wholly discontinuous from other social groups, communities and institutions. While the latter can be subjected to sociological scrutiny, it was claimed that the church is exempt from such an approach. To Welch the church appears very much like other human communities and can even be mistaken for nothing more than that. Welch has argued that the church “stands unequivocally on our side of the Creator/creature

24. Ibid.
26. Claude Welch (1922–2009) was an American historical theologian specializing in Karl Barth and the nineteenth century theology. He was also an ordained Methodist minister. He taught at Princeton, Yale, and the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. John Knox (1900–1990) was an American Methodist and Episcopalian theologian. His teaching career included Emory University, University of Chicago Divinity School, and Union Theological Seminary (New York) among others. His scholarship focused on the New Testament and early Christianity. He was the editor of Christian Century and the Journal of Religion.
27. Welch, The Reality of the Church, 19.
He expressed his insight into the human reality of the church most convincingly in the following statement, which relates the church to the kingdom of God.

The church is not itself the objective rule of God. Though one might affirm that the kingdom is apprehended only in the church, that to apprehend the Kingdom is to be in the church, or even that God’s realm is coextensive with the church . . . he must still say that the church stands over against God’s rule as a “subjective pole,” as the community which acknowledges and lives in response to God’s rule. The church may be fully dependent on God’s act, but it is not simply God acting. It is a people believing, worshipping, obeying, witnessing. Thus we can and must make fast at the outset our understanding of the church as a body or community of human beings, albeit existing in response to the activity of God. In this sense, the ontology of the church means in the first instance the humanly subjective pole of the relationship.

A similar emphasis on the human reality of the church Komonchak also found in the work of John Knox who argued that the church needs to be understood as a human response to God’s action in Christ. The church for Knox is “the sole residuum of the event [of Christ].”

Welch also warns against a simple parallelism between the nature of the church and the human nature of Christ. The classical Christological doctrine states that the subject of the human nature of Christ is the second person of the Trinity. Welch points out that this cannot be asserted about the church. Thus the key point for Welch is that while fully dependent on God, the church is not God but a human community responding to God’s call. Komonchak found this point of critical importance for articulating the main ecclesiological issue. As will be shown

28. Ibid., 43.
29. Ibid., 48.
later, Komonchak would appropriate this point of Welch and make it central to his own ecclesiological project.

Furthermore, the work of James Gustafson provided Komonchak with an additional conceptual tool to engage the central problem in ecclesiology. In his *Treasure in Earthen Vessels* Gustafson appropriated the work of such sociologists and philosophers of religion as Emile Durkheim, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Josiah Royce to arrive at an interpretation of the church as a human and social reality. From Gustafson, Komonchak appropriated the term *theological reductionism* which he has used to express his reservation about some post-Vatican II Catholic ecclesiologies. By theological reductionism Gustafson means “the exclusive use of Biblical and doctrinal language in the interpretation of the Church.” This view rests on the assumption “that the Church is so absolutely unique in character that it can be understood only in its own private language.”

Komonchak thinks that his criticism of theological reductionism applies to some of the new ecclesiological approaches which emerged after Vatican II. He says:

If the newer ecclesiologies did not hesitate to speak of a certain “sociological reductionism” in classical ecclesiology’s near exclusive attention to the questions of

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33. James Gustafson (1925–) is a prominent American theologian mostly known for his work in theological ethics. Now retired, he held teaching posts at Yale, the University of Chicago, and Emory University.
34. See Komonchak, “History and Social Theory in Ecclesiology,” 4–7.
36. Ibid.
37. Komonchak thinks, for instance, that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith came close to theological reductionism in its criticism of Leonardo Boff. See Komonchak, “Toward a Theology of the Local Church,” 5–6.
authority, they ran the danger of falling into the opposite danger of “theological
reductionism.”³⁸

Komonchak is not saying that the newer ecclesiologies deny the human, societal dimensions of
the church. His reservation is rather that these dimensions of the church are in the newer
ecclesiologies perceived as secondary in importance to the divine, spiritual, and invisible
dimensions, which make the church an absolutely unique social phenomenon.³⁹ This, for
Komonchak, is reflected particularly “when predications about God are confused with
predications about the Church and when predications about the Church are thought to have
substantial meaning without reference to any created body of spiritual creatures.”⁴⁰ The bottom
line for Komonchak is expressed in this question: “Are there any predications made about the
Church . . . that do not require to be verified in some concrete created community?”⁴¹

In Komonchak’s view, classical ecclesiology is much less susceptible to the charge of
theological reductionism because it has employed social and political theory and attended to the
reality of the church as a human society.⁴² He writes:

At its origins, classical ecclesiology was not hesitant in applying what passed for social
theory to the Church, whether in the borrowing from Aristotle’s political theory in the
Middle Ages or in the imitation of modern juridic thought in the last two centuries. But
in both cases, the borrowing was for the sake of self-defense and a vindication of the
*libertas Ecclesiae* in the context of fairly sophisticated secular theories. It served only to
illumine certain dimensions of the Church—principally the necessity and distribution of
power--; and once this was accomplished, an appeal was immediately made to the *de

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³⁹. Ibid., 4.
⁴¹. Ibid.
⁴². See Komonchak, History and Social Theory in Ecclesiology,” 6.
...iure divino character of its structures and to the Church’s unique origins, character and goals to argue the irrelevance of comparisons with other social bodies.43

As we will see later, Komonchak will advocate that ecclesiologists employ social theory in ecclesiology and that this is possible without falling into sociological reductionism.

Avoiding theological reductionism and recovery of the notion of the church as a human reality are the most significant insights of James Gustafson and Claude Welch which influenced Komonchak’s thinking on ecclesiology. These insights helped Komonchak identify the central problem for ecclesiology, namely, to conceive the church as one reality composed of two dimensions—divine and human—and to bridge the gap between the high theological language used of the church in Scripture and tradition and the concrete communities of men and women which gather as church.

4.3. METHOD FOR ECCLESIOLOGY IN GENERAL

As explained in the previous section, the context for Komonchak’s engagement with methodological issues in ecclesiology was the shift which took place in Catholic ecclesiology after the Second Vatican Council. In Komonchak’s view some of the ecclesiologies which became dominant after the council recovered and consequently emphasized the transcendent and spiritual dimensions of the church neglected in Catholic ecclesiology prior to Vatican II, but they left the connection between these dimensions and the concrete communities of believers unarticulated. They did not seriously explore the human and sociological aspects of the church, and this made them susceptible to the charge of theological reductionism.

In this portion of the chapter I will discuss how Komonchak conceives ecclesiology as a critical systematic theological discipline. The name of Bernard Lonergan (1904–1984) will be often referenced as the one from whom Komonchak derived many of the most important foundational categories for his ecclesiological project. As will be shown, Komonchak found in Lonergan’s *Insight* and *Method in Theology* categories of heuristic value, which suggested how one might construct foundations for a systematic ecclesiology.

Ecclesiology is a systematic understanding of the church. But what is the church? Any method for its systematic understanding must depend on how one conceives that which one wants to understand. Thus, prior to presenting how Komonchak envisions method in ecclesiology, I will outline how he conceives the church—what the church is.

A. The Church: what is it?
   i. *congregatio fidelium*

*Who Are the Church?* is the title of a lecture Komonchak delivered at Marquette University in January 2008. It brings together several elements of his ecclesiological project. A good portion of the lecture is dedicated to determining the referent of the word “church.” This issue is at the core of Komonchak’s ecclesiology and is the basis of what he says has been the single question he pursued for over forty years of teaching ecclesiology: “the relationship between the glorious things that are said in the Bible and in the tradition about the Church . . . and the concrete community of limited and sinful men and women who gather as the Church at any time or place all around the world.”

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44. Lonergan was Komonchak’s teacher during his studies at the Gregorian University in Rome.
As explained earlier, Komonchak’s reservation about some ecclesiologies which became prominent after the Second Vatican Council has been that they were constructed in strictly theological terms and that the connection with concrete believers and their communities stayed underexplored. It appears to Komonchak that those ecclesiologies have presented the church as an entity somewhere above us, a suprapersonal reality, and that theological language refers to this suprapersonal church rather than to concrete men and women and their communities. To address this, Komonchak developed a hypothesis that, in regard to every statement one makes about the church, one should be prepared to answer the following questions: “Of whom is one speaking when one speaks of the Church? To whom does the word refer? Of whom is it true? In whom is it true?” Unless these questions are asked, Komonchak thinks ecclesiology will become “a study of abstractions.”

Komonchak presents his position regarding the referent of the word “church” by analyzing Avery Dulles’ project in his *Models of the Church*. Komonchak says that Dulles resorted to the notion of models because he did not think that a single definition of the church was possible. Dulles examined the Scriptures, early tradition, and *Lumen gentium* which provide a variety of images or symbols of the church. As first-order expressions he examined them systematically and on the level of second-order reflection he arrived at models of the church.

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47. Ibid., 11–12.

48. Ibid., 9; see also “Lonergan and Post-Conciliar Ecclesiology,” 172.


50. There have been several editions of Dulles’ *Models of the Church*. The first edition was published in 1974 by Doubleday. It contained twelve chapters and an introduction, and presented five models of the church (chapters 2–6). The second edition (1987) was expanded for a sixth model—church as the community of disciples (chapter XIII). Reprints of this edition after 2000 also contain an appendix which treats the ecclesiology of John Paul II. Komonchak here refers to the original edition.
Their function is synthetic and heuristic in that they express the variety of aspects of the church and provide the questions for further understanding. Komonchak finds, however, several problems with Dulles’ project. First, he does not think that Dulles remained consistent in distinguishing between the different orders of language. Second, he does not think that because there are a variety of images of the church there needs to be a variety of models. He believes, rather, that a single model might be able to integrate the insights present through the variety of images. Indeed, for him in this lies the goal of a systematic ecclesiology. Third, Komonchak says that Dulles leaves unstated something basic, namely, what his models are models of. They are obviously the models of the church, and it is at this point that the question of the referent of the word “church” arises. Komonchak asks how one knows that the diversity of images and models refer to the same reality, unless one already has at least a heuristic notion of the church.51

Komonchak argues that Dulles himself provided the answer, though perhaps unknowingly. In the expanded edition of his Models of the Church (1987) Dulles introduced a sixth model, “the church as a community of disciples.” For Komonchak, however, this is not a new model at all. In his view, this model tells us who it is that the first-order images are describing, who it is to whom the second-order models refer. It identifies, in other words, the subject of ecclesiology: the Church is the community of disciples of Jesus Christ. “Community of disciples” serves to designate what it is that is said to be, say, People of God, the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, what it is that is proposed for critical and systematic understanding when it is set forth as an institution, communio, sacrament, herald, servant.52


52. Komonchak, Who Are the Church?, 30.
Komonchak further argues that the phrase “community of disciples” is tantamount to one of the oldest and most common terms for the church—congregatio (or convocatio) fidelium, the assembly of the believers. Congregatio fidelium is, for him, the referent of the word “church.”

ii. A community constituted by meaning and mediated by value

In describing the church as a community constituted by meaning and mediated by value Komonchak appropriated Lonergan’s understanding of community. For Lonergan, community is not just a group of people within a geographical area, but rather an achievement of common meaning which exists where there are common experiences, understandings, judgments, values, goals, and policies. Where these do not exist there is no community. It follows that community is not a fixed reality but exists only so long as events of meaning and value take place and are shared among the community’s members. To belong to a community is to share with others in a common meaning; community realizes itself through continued communication. Thus, community can be described as “a process of self-constitution.”

As an instance of a reality mediated by meaning, community is a social reality, which, following Lonergan, Komonchak distinguishes from merely natural realities. He illustrates this difference as follows:

Think of the difference between an arrowhead and a mere piece of flint, between a wink and a facial tic, between a city and a beehive. Physically and chemically, the arrowhead

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53. Ibid., 31–32; See also “The Epistemology of Reception,” 193; “Lonergan and Post-Conciliar Ecclesiology,” 171.


is not distinct from another piece of flint; but an arrowhead is much more than mere flint—human hands have worked on it and meant something by it.57

Thus, communities are social realities which are realized when a group of human beings share common meaning and value.

This heuristic and purely formal understanding of community provides for Komonchak sets of questions to be asked of various groups in order to determine whether they are communities. Komonchak considers it quite legitimate to ask such questions also of the church if it is considered to be a community. One would ask,

what is the common experience that provides the potential for the self-realization of the Church, what are the common understandings and judgments that give form and act to the potentiality for community given in the experience, what are the commitments and decisions, values and goals, that render the community effectively present.58

Komonchak thinks that identifying the answers to these questions is one possible way of understanding how the church is a human community of meaning and value, and also of discovering what it means that this human community is the People of God, the Body of Christ, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit. Komonchak doubts that without this or some other similar effort the question about the relation between the divine and the human dimensions of the church—which for him is the central issue in ecclesiology—can even be posed. One element, that pertaining to the human reality of the church, would be absent.59

57. Komonchak, “Towards a Theology of the Local Church,” 10; see also “The Epistemology of Reception,” 189.
58. Komonchak, “Ministry and the Local Church,” 68.
In line with this understanding of community, and further appropriating Lonergan, Komonchak describes the church as “an achievement in the world mediated and constituted by meaning and value. Its substance is the inner gift of God’s love, embodied and interpreted by Christ’s message.” The phrase “inner gift of God’s love” refers to the transformation of one’s subjectivity resulting from a religious conversion. Komonchak explains that the church exists as one of the many worlds constituted by meaning and value. What makes it different from them is that it “defines itself by reference to Jesus Christ and lives by the grace of his Spirit.”

Komonchak explains that unlike merely physical realities such as Mount Everest, the church is a reality which does not exist apart from human acts of meaning and value. Like such realities as friendships, marriages, universities or governments, the church does not exist apart from acts of collective intentionality. The church’s ontological reality consists of the common intentional acts of meaning and value of those who make the church. This is what Komonchak means by saying that the ontology of the church is subjective and intersubjective. The church “is an event of intersubjectivity.”

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60. Lonergan defines the church as “the community that results from the outer communication of Christ’s message and from the inner gift of God’s love.” *Method in Theology*, 361.


63. Komonchak, *Who Are the Church?*, 34; see also “The Epistemology of Reception,” 181–86.

64. Komonchak, “History and Social Theory in Ecclesiology,” 39.
iii. A process of self-constitution/a historical subject of its self-realization

Appropriating the notion of self-realization (*Selbstvollzug der Kirche*) from Karl Rahner’s ecclesiology⁶⁵ and from Lonergan,⁶⁶ Komonchak speaks about the church as a historical subject of its self-realization. With this description he wants to make two points: (1) the event character of the church’s existence, and (2) that the church is the historical subject of its coming-to-be.⁶⁷ Komonchak believes that this description of the church is required once it is recognized that the theological and transcendent language about the church such as the People of God, the Body of Christ, or the Temple of the Holy Spirit refers to a concrete group of men and women who gather as church.⁶⁸

This insight, for Komonchak, is at the same time his solution to the central problem in ecclesiology, which has been identified above as how to understand the church as one reality having two dimensions—divine and human. The solution lies in conceiving the church “as the human community which is the effect in the world of God’s self-communication in Christ and the Spirit.”⁶⁹ There is no doubt, for Komonchak, that God’s self-communication defines the church as a “distinctive reality” and that this point must not be neglected in an ecclesiology that wants to be “orthodox and adequate.”⁷⁰ But he argues that defining the church as an effect of

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⁶⁷. Komonchak, “Ministry and the Local Church,” 64.

⁶⁸. Ibid., 65.

⁶⁹. Ibid., 66.

⁷⁰. Ibid.
God’s self-communication in the world does not yet constitute the complete understanding of the church unless it also involves the notion of the church as a human community. The church is the subject of its own self-realization as a human community. Like any other human community, which is made to happen by human beings, the church too is made to happen by its members who are its historical subject. The church exists because they respond to God’s self-communication and because by God’s grace they believe, hope and love. If there ceased to be a group of people who did that, the church would cease to be.\textsuperscript{71}

\textit{iv. A human reality and a human and ecclesial product}

As an achievement in the world mediated and constituted by meaning and value the church is, for Komonchak, a human reality. As shown above, Komonchak appropriated this insight and its importance for ecclesiology from a number of Protestant scholars. He is aware, however, that this is a sensitive point. He explains that if one’s intent is negative, that is, if all that one wants to communicate is to differentiate the church from natural realities, then saying that the church is a human reality should not cause any difficulty. If, however, such a statement is given a positive value, then objections often arise that the church’s transcendent, supernatural, and divine nature has been compromised.\textsuperscript{72}

To respond to such objections,\textsuperscript{73} Komonchak articulated a strictly theological interpretation of what it means to say that the church is a human reality. He says:

\begin{quote}
Whatever Christian faith may say about the divine origin, center, and goal of the Church, it never pretends that the Church does not stand on this side of the distinction between Creator and creature. The Church is not God; it is not Jesus Christ; it is not the Holy
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 66–68.

\textsuperscript{72} Komonchak, “Ecclesiology and Social Theory,” 63; “The Epistemology of Reception,” 194.

\textsuperscript{73} Komonchak does not give references for the representatives of such objections.
Spirit. If the Church is the People of God, the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, it is all of these as a human reality, that is, because certain events occur within the mutually related consciousnesses of a group of human beings.\textsuperscript{74}

Komonchak believes that it is possible to affirm that the church is a human reality without denying that it is grounded in God’s call. For him, this is analogous to saying that faith is a human act, even though only possible through grace.\textsuperscript{75}

Flowing out from his understanding of the church as the subject of its self-realization and analogous to Peter Berger’s and Thomas Luckman’s view of society,\textsuperscript{76} Komonchak views the church also as a human and an ecclesial product. It is a community of language, of belief, and of freedom.\textsuperscript{77} One becomes a member of this community by “learning to share the language and beliefs and to enjoy the freedom the Church offers.”\textsuperscript{78} Komonchak insists that the notion of the church as a human reality and a human product does not violate the church’s transcendence. The point is simply an affirmation that

what God’s word and grace have produced in the world is the human community whose historical subject is the group of men and women who are its members. These men and women gather around common meanings and values which they consider to be God’s own self-communication, and even their very gathering in this faith they attribute to the grace of the Spirit. Still it is they who gather, and, under grace, in ways so similar to the ways in which other communities assemble that it can be said that the Church is a human product.\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{74} Komonchak, “Ecclesiology and Social Theory,” 63. Komonchak here footnotes Welch’s The Reality of the Church, 48, a passage cited on p. 115, and which Komonchak restates.

\textsuperscript{75} Komonchak, “Ecclesiology and Social Theory,” 63.


\textsuperscript{77} See Komonchak, “The Church and the Mediation of the Christian Self,” 153–64.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 165.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
This is a cogent articulation of the notion of the church as a human product. One can also see that Komonchak anticipates possible criticisms and that he maintains balance in affirming the church’s nature with regard to the divine and the human dimension.

v.  A social reality

For Komonchak, the assertion that the church is a social reality, like the one that the church is a human reality, may be relatively harmless at first. This may change, however, if one argued that if the church were a social reality one would expect to observe in the church the processes, operations, and acts which are characteristic of social relations in other social realities. Komonchak believes that two principles from Aquinas can be helpful here. According to the first one, things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower, and according to the second, God moves everything in its own manner. Based on these principles Komonchak does not see why an ecclesiologist could not utilize social theory to learn how social realities are constituted and in turn apply this to the constitution of the church as a social reality. For Komonchak, some social theory—even if implicit—is indispensable for the work of an ecclesiologist, just as some implicit philosophy is indispensable for a theologian. Moreover, it is in making the implicit explicit that the truly critical character of theology or ecclesiology consists in.

80. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, II-II, q. 1, a. 2; referenced in Komonchak, “Ecclesiology and Social Theory,” 64.

81. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, I-II, q. 113, a. 3; referenced in Komonchak, “Ecclesiology and Social Theory,” 64.

82. See Komonchak, “Ecclesiology and Social Theory,” 64.
Komonchak is critical of reification with regard to the church. He cites the example of Charles Journet, for whom “the church is not without sinners, but she is without sin.” Following Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, Komonchak understands reification as a “tendency to misrepresent the distinctive ontology of social relations and institutions,” namely, to “apprehend them as non-human, assign them the same kind of reality as other things in this world,” and, in the words of Berger and Luckmann, to “bestow on them an ontological status independent of human activity and signification.” This issue of reification is for Komonchak connected with another issue already referred to, namely, that of conceiving the church as a unique social phenomenon and the subsequent tendencies to confuse predications about God with predications about the Church, and to make predications about the Church that are thought to have substantial meaning without reference to a human community. Komonchak considers reification a problem because it overlooks the contribution of the members of the church to its realization. In other words, it fails to consider that the church is a human and a social reality and that the ontology of the church is intersubjective.


85. Komonchak, “The Epistemology of Reception,” 188.


88. See Komonchak, *Who Are the Church?*, 37.
vi. A redemptive community

For Komonchak, there is a close connection between the church and redemption. The insight into this connection he credits to Lonergan. At the beginning of one of his articles, Komonchak reveals how this insight came about.89 He explains that as students in Rome at the Gregorian University, he and David Tracy90 used to visit Lonergan and “pester him with questions.”91 One of them dealt with redemption and the four Aristotelian causes. To Komonchak’s surprise Lonergan stated that those categories were not adequate to articulate the reality of redemption, that a theory of history and historical categories were needed. Komonchak confesses that at the time he did not understand Lonergan’s response.92

A few years later, when he was beginning to teach ecclesiology, Komonchak reread the epilogue to Lonergan’s Insight—according to Komonchak, “one of the most important statements on the Church in Lonergan’s writings.”93 It was on that occasion that he began to see the connection between Lonergan’s remark on redemption and the point Lonergan was making in the epilogue. The pertinent section of the epilogue reads:

It may be asked in what department of theology the historical aspect of development might be treated, and I would like to suggest that it may possess peculiar relevance to a treatise on the Mystical Body of Christ. For in any theological treatise a distinction may be drawn between a material and a formal element: the material element is supplied by Scriptural and patristic texts and by dogmatic pronouncements; the formal element, that


90. David Tracy (1939–) is an American theologian and professor emeritus at the University of Chicago. Ordained in 1963, he received his doctorate from the Gregorian University, Rome, in 1965. He has published extensively in the area of foundational theology and hermeneutics. Tracy evaluated Lonergan’s achievement in The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).


92. Ibid.

makes a treatise a treatise, consists in the pattern of terms and relations through which the materials may be embraced in a single, coherent view. Thus the formal element in the treatise on grace consists in theorems on the supernatural, and the formal element in the treatise on the Blessed Trinity consists in theorems on the notions of procession, relation, and person. Now while the Scriptural, patristic, and dogmatic materials for a treatise on the Mystical Body have been assembled, I would incline to the opinion that its formal element remains incomplete as long as it fails to draw upon a theory of history. . . . It may be that the contemporary crisis of human living and human values demands of the theologian, in addition to treatises on the unique and to treatises on the universal common to many instances, a treatise on the concrete universal that is mankind in the concrete and cumulative consequences of the acceptance or rejection of the message of the Gospel. And as the remote possibility of thought on the concrete universal lies in the insight that grasps the intelligible in the sensible, so its proximate possibility resides in a theory of development that can envisage not only natural and intelligent progress but also sinful decline, and not only progress and decline but also supernatural recovery.  

From this passage Komonchak began to see the connection between Lonergan’s remark about redemption and the church. Redemption had to be treated from the perspective of historical causality, namely, as the effect of Christ on history. It had to be approached as a historical phenomenon in the treatise on the church, where the church had to be conceived as a community of those who have accepted the Gospel and “through which Christ continues to have a redemptive impact on history.” The formal element, which according to Lonergan was still incomplete in ecclesiology, had to be a theory of history. For Komonchak then, the mission of the church in history is to be a sign and agent of God’s redemptive purpose.  

vii. God’s gift and our task

As discussed above, Komonchak does not think that it is possible for Catholic theology to perceive the church either as something that comes only from God or something that is only a human product. Based on Lumen gentium 8 he considers such an either/or approach to be a false

94. Lonergan, Insight, 742–43.
95. Komonchak, Preface to Foundations, viii; see also “Lonergan and the Church,” 88.
alternative. For him, two sets of statements must be made about the church: first, that the church is a human community subject to everything that human communities are subject to in history, and second, that the church is the People of God, the Body of Christ, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit. The church comes to be because men and women under God’s grace respond to God’s call through Christ and the Spirit, and because they believe, hope, and love. If there ceased to be a group of people who did this, Komonchak says, the church would cease to be. Thus, in Komonchak’s understanding, the church is always both God’s gift and our task. With regards to the former, it is a redeemed community, an intersubjectivity transformed by grace, the fellowship of the Spirit; with regard to the latter, it is a human and social phenomenon constituted by meaning and value and a historical subject of its own self-realization.

B. The Object of Ecclesiology

The object of ecclesiology is what an ecclesiologist seeks to understand systematically, namely, the church. As we have seen in the previous pages, Komonchak understands the church as both God’s gift and our task. It is a community constituted by common meaning and mediated by common value, a community of experience, understanding, judgment, and decision. It is a redemptive community which mediates Christ to the world. The church is also a process of its self-constitution. In line with this understanding of what the church is, Komonchak describes the object of ecclesiology as “the set (or sets) of experiences, understandings, symbols, words, judgments, decisions, actions, relationships, and institutions which distinguish the group of people called ‘the Church.’” And the purpose of ecclesiology “is to understand how and

why it is that these related elements constitute the group of people as what in faith is called ‘the Church.’”

C. Critical Systematic Ecclesiology

At the beginning of the 1980s, when Komonchak began to publish his most significant articles in ecclesiology, he thought that it was not taken for granted by ecclesiologists that ecclesiology “ought to pursue a unifying systematic understanding of the church.” The weakening of the systematic endeavor was in his view not limited to ecclesiology, but was true about other theological disciplines as well. He considered several reasons why this was so.

In some cases [the decline of interest in the systematic task of theology] appears to derive from a failure to acknowledge the systematic exigence, from the belief, that is, that the understanding considered to suffice for everyday living suffices for all living and that, therefore, categories not obviously and immediately relevant to the concrete conscious living of believers can have no value. More defensible perhaps is a reluctance to undertake systematic work because of the absence of a consensus on the methods, categories, or criteria of theology and the consequent necessity of the systematic theologian’s undertaking the extremely difficult task of laying his own foundations carefully and critically. Finally, the decline in interest in systematic theology is often linked with a newly developed respect for theological pluralism. This is somewhat understandable as a reaction to the dominance exercised, not always by force of argument, by scholastic methods and categories. Where this reaction is still powerful, any attempt to construct a theology which makes systematic, that is unifying, claims can easily be suspected of having totalitarian ambitions.

In spite of the complexity of the situation just described, Komonchak remained convinced that ecclesiologists must make an attempt at the systematic understanding of the church.

He developed his vision of systematic ecclesiology in a critical engagement with post-Vatican II ecclesiologies, especially with the models approach of Avery Dulles. Based on

100. Ibid.
101. Ibid., 65.
102. Ibid.
Komonchak’s references, Dulles seems to be his main conversational partner. Komonchak does not think that the models approach represents anything like an ideal for ecclesiology.\textsuperscript{103} He is critical of this approach for its “inadequate methodology.”\textsuperscript{104} The main reason is Komonchak’s disagreement with Dulles that the mysterious nature of the church demands the plurality of models and precludes an ecclesiologist to go beyond them.\textsuperscript{105} For Dulles, one is “condemned”\textsuperscript{106} to work with the models. As has already been stated,\textsuperscript{107} Komonchak believes that a single model could incorporate the insights of the various images of the church, and for him this is in fact the task of systematic ecclesiology.\textsuperscript{108}

Komonchak does not dismiss the models approach. He has acknowledged that the models may be theologically attractive, but at the same time he has contended that, because they repeat the biblical or abstract theological language, they may be somewhat foreign to the experience of the faithful.\textsuperscript{109} He finds the deficiency of the models in that “none of [them] draws very seriously upon social theory.”\textsuperscript{110} And he comes to the conclusion that ecclesiology will not

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{103} See Komonchak, “History and Social Theory in Ecclesiology,” 12.
\item \textsuperscript{104} Komonchak, “People of God, Hierarchical Structure, and Communion: An Easy Fit?” 91.
\item \textsuperscript{105} Cf. Dulles, \textit{Models of the Church}, 9–10.
\item \textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 196.
\item \textsuperscript{107} Cf. p. 121.
\item \textsuperscript{108} Komonchak, \textit{Who Are the Church?}, 24.
\item \textsuperscript{109} See Komonchak, “History and Social Theory in Ecclesiology,” 6; “Towards a Theology of the Local Church,” 4.
\item \textsuperscript{110} Komonchak, “History and Social Theory in Ecclesiology,” 6.
\end{itemize}
become scientific “until some serious effort is made to think out basic social and historical categories.”

In 1981 Komonchak published three articles in which he spelled out in what way his reading of Bernard Lonergan brought him to envision how one could lay foundations for ecclesiology as a systematic understanding of the church. Appropriating Lonergan’s notion of systematic understanding, which has theory as its goal, Komonchak distinguishes such an understanding from common sense or from what suffices for everyday living. For Lonergan, one knows the meaning of words either through common sense or theoretically. In the former case, one knows what the words mean on the basis of how they are employed appropriately, and in the latter case, because one possesses their definitions. Komonchak notes that systematic understanding asks questions about what is taken for granted in the understanding that suffices or appears to suffice for everyday living. He explains that when such an understanding is achieved, the data given in experience are intelligibly related, not to the observer, but to other data. General relationships are ascertained, patterns of relationships discovered, types of patterns distinguished, frequencies of occurrences determined. In the course of the effort, systematic understanding devises its own methods of observation, inquiry, and verification as well as its own manners and forms of expression. It is in these developments that systematic understanding appears most obviously to differ from the understanding considered to suffice for everyday living.

Thus, the goal of a systematic understanding is theory.

111. Ibid., 12.
112. Komonchak, “Ecclesiology and Social Theory,” “History and Social Theory in Ecclesiology,” and “Lonergan and the Task of Ecclesiology.”
114. See Lonergan, Method in Theology, 304.
Komonchak further explains that with regard to systematic understanding there is a basic distinction between the natural and human sciences. While some data are common to both, those who investigate human realities differ from natural scientists in that they must from the start take into account that “their data include and are differentiated by conscious operations and acts.”\(^{116}\) This is especially the case when one seeks to understand social realities whose distinctive data are formed by the operations and acts through which “individuals are consciously related to other individuals.”\(^{117}\) Thus when it comes to social realities the focus is on human operations and acts “in so far as they regard other individuals and their operations and acts.”\(^{118}\) Komonchak argues that the relationship between a systematic understanding and one which suffices for everyday living is much more complicated in human sciences, particularly in social theory, than in natural sciences, because “the human scientist must take into account not only the intelligibility but the intelligence and freedom of his object.”\(^{119}\)

Komonchak believes that the distinction between theory and common sense, which he appropriated from Lonergan, can be applied to ecclesiology. He thinks that in ecclesiology theory has become something taken for granted, by which he means that the language of theory has been employed, but often outside of the theoretical context and content. Komonchak believes that ecclesiology would benefit from examining the taken-for-granted as this could serve to differentiate between common sense and theory, as well as among theories

\(^{116}\) Komonchak, “Ecclesiology and Social Theory,” 59.

\(^{117}\) Ibid., 60. Komonchak notes that he uses the word “consciously” in the Lonergan’s sense of a subject’s concomitant awareness of himself and of his acts.

\(^{118}\) Ibid., 60.

\(^{119}\) Ibid., 60–61.
themselves.\textsuperscript{120} He thinks that ecclesiologists should define for themselves what exactly they mean by such terms as “individual and community, community and meaning, and meaning and history,” and this would consequently prepare them “to engage in critical and dialectical conversation with social theorists.”\textsuperscript{121} This, for Komonchak, will require a change in how ecclesiologists approach their discipline, namely, it will require that in their effort to work out foundations in ecclesiology they move beyond “the question of the hermeneutics of texts to the question of the hermeneutics of social existence.”\textsuperscript{122}

Komonchak argues that “a systematic understanding of the Church will be in important respects similar to other systematic understandings of social realities,”\textsuperscript{123} and as a result the work of an ecclesiologist will be similar to that of a social theorist. This follows from Komonchak’s understanding of the church as both a human and a social reality, and it further rests on two additional presuppositions. The first is that “method in ecclesiology is not a matter of deductions from first principles.”\textsuperscript{124} The second is that “ecclesiology cannot be restricted to the interpretation of \textit{statements about} the Church,”\textsuperscript{125} since they do not exhaust the Church’s self-realization at any point of history. Komonchak explains that

\begin{quote}
it is the whole set (or sets) of experiences, understandings, symbols, words, judgments, statements, decisions, actions, relations, and institutions which distinguish the group of people called “the Church” that constitutes the object of ecclesiology. The Church is not simply that about which a variety of statements speak nor is it a reality accessible only
\end{quote}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{120} Komonchak, “Lonergan and the Task of Ecclesiology,” 51.
\bibitem{121} Ibid., 53.
\bibitem{122} Komonchak, “Lonergan and the Task of Ecclesiology,” 53.
\bibitem{123} Komonchak, “Ecclesiology and Social Theory,” 67.
\bibitem{124} Ibid.
\bibitem{125} Ibid., emphasis in the original.
\end{thebibliography}
through those statements; it is also a social reality constituted within the common
consciousness of its members, so that access to it can also be gained by an understanding
of them, of what they do, and of how what they do makes them the Church.126

Thus, for Komonchak, a considerable part of the task of an ecclesiologist consists of interpreting
the self-realization(s) of the church, and consequently it should be expected that part of the
ecclesiologist’s task will “resemble in both form and method the work of a social theorist who
interprets other social realities.”127

Komonchak notes, however, that it is quite rare for ecclesiologists to show any
acquaintance with methodology in human sciences as well as with what social sciences say about
such commonly used terms in ecclesiology as community, society, structure, and institution. He
wonders whether an ecclesiologist can critically address what it means to say that the church is
an institution, a community, or a society without learning what social theorists say about those
concepts. He further asks,

Can an ecclesiologist hope to understand what authority in the Church is without
examining first what a social relationship is and then exploring what social theorists have
to say about “authority,” “power,” “legitimation,” and so on and about the types of
relationships in which they are found? Could not social theory help ecclesiologists to
escape from such blind alleys as the dichotomies between “institution” and “event,”
“charism” and “office,” “essence” and “forms,” and Wesen and Unwesen?128

Komonchak thinks that in all these areas ecclesiologists could learn from social theorists how to
pose their questions more critically as well as how to derive general categories through which
they would articulate a systematic understanding of the church.129

126. Ibid.
127. Ibid., 69.
128. Ibid., 70.
129. Komonchak has appropriated the term “general categories” from Lonergan. This term refers to
subjects which are the object of study for both theologians and scholars in other disciplines. Such categories
Komonchak also argues that the goal of arriving at a systematic understanding of the church will require a methodological shift in ecclesiology. He envisions this shift to be analogous to the one Lonergan thought was necessary in the theology of grace. As Komonchak explains, Lonergan argued that by employing Aristotle’s metaphysical categories in his theology of grace Aquinas rearticulated Augustine’s theology of conversion, which was expressed in psychological categories. Lonergan further argued that what the scholastics meant with the metaphysical categories when they spoke of grace as the created effect in persons of the uncreated self-gift of God is tantamount to what his own analysis of intentionality and conversion describes as a state of being in love without qualification. Thus, through the analysis of intentionality and conversion Lonergan rearticulated Aquinas’ metaphysical categories resulting in a theology of grace as transformed subjectivity.¹³⁰

This transposition in the theology of grace worked out by Lonergan has led Komonchak to think that an analogous transposition was also necessary in ecclesiology where, without denying the newly recovered spiritual and transcendent dimension of the church, attention needs to be turned to the church as a human community, since the church is the concrete men and women in whom what Scripture and tradition say about the church is true. Komonchak explains:

As an adequate theology of grace must speak of the created effect of uncreated grace and do so, in Aquinas’ terms, as an entitative habit or, in modern terms, as a transformation of subjectivity, so an adequate theology of the Church must speak of it as the human

community or transformed intersubjectivity which results from the word of Christ and the grace of the Spirit.\textsuperscript{131}

Komonchak thinks that the shift in ecclesiology he proposes might result in bringing the ecclesologies developed after Vatican II down from the dogmatic and theological heights to the concrete communities in which is realized what is meant by the “Mystical Body,” and “People of God,” the “Temple of the Holy Spirit,” \textit{una persona mystica}, the \textit{Ursakrament}, and so on.\textsuperscript{132}

The bottom line for Komonchak is that like Lonergan’s transformation of the theology of grace which results in an understanding of grace as transformed subjectivity, so critical systematic ecclesiology must be rooted “in an analysis of the social and historical conditions and consequences of conversion.”\textsuperscript{133}

Komonchak is aware that his vision for systematic ecclesiology may draw a charge of sociological reductionism and he argues why this criticism would be unfounded. He understands sociological reductionism as a view according to which the church is nothing more than just one more social body in a society. In such a view, the claim that the church relates to God, that it has a transcendent, spiritual dimension would not be accepted. The distinctiveness of the church from other social bodies, namely, that the church’s members are organized around a religious purpose would be acknowledged only insofar as it constitutes the church’s self-understanding. For Komonchak, an ecclesiologist (unlike a sociologist) must take into consideration two sets of data: those that refer to the self-realization of the church, and those that come from the

\textsuperscript{131} Komonchak, “Towards a Theology of the Local Church,” 7.

\textsuperscript{132} Komonchak, “Lonergan and the Task of Ecclesiology,” 55.

\textsuperscript{133} Komonchak, Preface to \textit{Foundations}, ix.
Scriptures, tradition, liturgy, magisterium, etc. Moreover, an ecclesiologist is to submit to authority in a way not demanded from a social scientist.\textsuperscript{134}

Komonchak is aware that sociological reductionism is a real danger for ecclesiology, and that ecclesiologists have rightfully been suspicious of it. For him, sociological reductionism leads to a false understanding of the church, for it omits the notion of the church as a theological theme. He thinks, however, that such reductionism “is rather rare among serious theologians, although it is hard to deny it can be found among many non-theologians.”\textsuperscript{135} As we have seen Komonchak’s position is that the church is not only our task but also God’s gift. For him, ecclesiology must always include and try to make coherent sense of the strictly theological dimensions of the Church, that is, those elements which only faith can receive and which describe the unique and transcendent character of the Church as the People of God, the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Spirit.\textsuperscript{136}

By accounting for the church’s two dimensions—divine and human—ecclesiologists can avoid both sociological reductionism and theological reductionism.

4.4. Method in Ecclesiology and The Theology of the Local Church

Although Komonchak’s theology of the local church is the subject of the next chapter, the connection between this topic and method in ecclesiology in Komonchak’s ecclesiological project will be presented here. The theology of the local church, which was for the most part a neglected ecclesiological topic in the decades preceding the Second Vatican Council, has been the subject of considerable interest in its aftermath. Komonchak believes that this requires both an explanation and a justification which, he argues, is found in the notion of the church’s

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{134} See Komonchak, “Ecclesiology and Social Theory,” 70–71.
\item \textsuperscript{135} Komonchak, “The Church in the United States Today, 3.
\item \textsuperscript{136} Komonchak, “Lonergan and the Church,” 79–80.
\end{itemize}
The genesis of the church is furthermore a foundational concept which grounds Komonchak’s insistence that ecclesiology must begin with and focus on the local church.\footnote{137}{With the notion of the church’s “genesis” Komonchak does not refer to the historical origins of the church, but to the church’s continued existence from one generation to the next. See Komonchak, “Toward a Theology of the Local Church,” 21.}

For Komonchak, the church—like other human communities—comes into being through “the conscious operations of its members.”\footnote{139}{Komonchak, “Toward a Theology of the Local Church,” 1–2.} He is fond of referring to Venerable Bede’s statement that “every day the Church gives birth to the Church.”\footnote{140}{Bede, \textit{Explanatio Apocalypsis}, 41; \textit{PL} 93, 166. For Komonchak’s references to Bede see “Lonergan and the Church,” 89; “Towards a Theology of the Local Church,” 21; “The Church: God’s Gift and Our Task,” 740; “The Church in the United States Today,” in \textit{The Spirit is Moving the Church in the United States}, ed. Francis A. Eigo (Villanova, PA: The Villanova University Press, 1989), 1-31, at 6; “The Epistemology of Reception,” 201; \textit{Who Are the Church?}, 44.}

Komonchak explains that with some help from social theorists an ecclesiologist can say that by reproducing its constitutive acts of meaning and value the church reproduces itself, and he points out that “the day the Church ceases to believe, hope, and love, is the day that the Church dies.”\footnote{141}{Komonchak, “Lonergan and the Church,” 89.}

Komonchak distinguishes two inseparable moments or principles in the genesis of the church: an objective and a subjective one.\footnote{142}{Komonchak notes that what he describes as the “objective moment” to some degree corresponds to the aspect of the church as “mother” and as \textit{ecclesia congregans}, as this latter is discussed by Henri de Lubac in his \textit{The Splendour of the Church} (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 55–86; Komonchak, “Towards a Theology of the Local Church,” 33.} The former is that which, in Komonchak’s understanding of the church, pertains to God’s gift, namely the divine initiative in Christ and the Spirit. Following Bede’s line of thought, this objective principle is one generation’s communication of the Christian meaning and value to another generation. The objective principle makes the church a reality distinct from other human communities. Were it lacking,
particular community would be something other than a church. Komonchak calls this principle “objective” because it is given. It stands vis-à-vis a new generation of potential believers as something already realized, but at the same time as a challenge—as one of the many worlds the new generation too may choose to realize.  

Komonchak understands the objective principle as “the objectification of the previous generation’s subjectivity.” This means that what is transmitted to another generation is what the previous generation has received and appropriated. Thus the new generation is invited to enter the world constructed by the former. Komonchak’s description of this process has been, for me personally, one of the most moving lines in his writings. He says:

> We are asked to believe what they have believed, to love what they have loved, to hope for what they hoped for. We are asked to recreate the world they have created, to continue in the world the social body that carries on the word of Christ and embodies in its fellowship and in its service the grace of the Spirit.

This objective moment is the principle of the church’s unity across generations and cultures.  

Komonchak argues, however, that this objective principle by itself does not make the church. The Church does not come to be solely out of the divine initiative. Rather, it is realized only when that which is offered as God’s gift is “received and appropriated by each successive generation of Christians.” The church’s coming to be has always required the free human response to the initiative of God in Christ and the Spirit. By itself, the objective element is only a potential principle of the church’s genesis. The church is achieved only in the act of personal

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145. Ibid.
147. Ibid.
and communal appropriation of the Gospel, which constitutes the subjective principle in the
 genesis of the church. In Komonchak’s understanding, “the whole ontology of the Church—
the real ‘objective’ existence of the Church—consists in the reception by faith of the Gospel. 
Reception is constitutive of the Church.”

It is this subjective principle which grounds the logic of Komonchak’s insistence that
ecclesiological reflection ought to start and center on the local church. This is because the
appropriation of God’s gift, by which the subjective element is constituted, takes place in and is
mediated by the existential and historic questions of the particular generations of men and
women. The logic of the subjective principle, for Komonchak, thus requires that “the genesis of
the Church is always and foremost the genesis of the local Church.” In other words, the
 genesis of the church does not take place in the abstract, but is rather a concrete achievement of a
particular group of people who respond to the Gospel.

It appears that Komonchak’s understanding of the genesis of the church was influenced
by Yves Congar. Komonchak explains that Congar proposed to distinguish the two moments in
the church’s genesis in classical metaphysical terms of form and matter. God’s gifts of word
and grace are the form, and the men and women who receive them are the matter of the church.
Komonchak finds Congar’s form/matter analogy useful but limited. It is useful because it
exposes the tendency to reify the formal principles as inadequate. He sees this tendency when

and Vraie et fausse réforme dans l’Église, 2nd ed. (Paris: Cerf, 1968), 92–93; referenced in “The Culture and
History as the Material Conditions of the Genesis of the Local Church,” in Changing Churches: The Local Church
holiness and sinlessness are predicated of the church on account of its formal principles, and sinfullness on account of the material ones. Since, based on this analogy, the church in its formal principles does not exist—“at least not on earth,” Komonchak adds—he finds these distinctions as facile. Furthermore, Komonchak considers this analogy to be useful for identifying why the many local and different churches are one church. The unity among the churches is embodied in the formal generative principles. The limitation of this analogy lies in the fact that in classical metaphysics, matter is pure passivity and receptivity while form is pure activity. Komonchak does not deny that the active initiative in the genesis of the church comes from God. It is also clear to him, however, that the church does not come to be unless believers recognize and respond to the Gospel. In other words, matter is not just passive. Thus, Komonchak considers the material principle also to be formally constitutive of church as it exists in history.

4.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed Komonchak’s contribution to method in ecclesiology in general, and has prepared the methodological grounding for Komonchak’s insistence that ecclesiological reflection ought to center and focus on the local church. With the Second Vatican Council a shift was introduced into Catholic ecclesiology. The shift consisted in moving away from the dominant approach of Catholic ecclesiology in the post-Reformation period, especially after Vatican I, which concentrated on the church’s institutional elements, to the approach neglected by the ecclesiologists in the decades preceding the council but recovered at

152. Komonchak, “The Culture and History as the Material Conditions of the Genesis of the Local Church,” 51.

153. Ibid., 52.
Vatican II, which brought to the foreground the transcendent and spiritual dimensions of the church. Komonchak, however, gives this shift a mixed evaluation. On the one hand, he welcomes the recovery of neglected themes, but on the other, he thinks that these new ecclesioologies themselves have had a tendency to neglect the connection between the church as a theological theme and the communities of believers who are the church. Komonchak’s methodological starting point, which rests on the premise that the church is but one reality made of divine and human elements, is to explain how the quite human can be the locus of the quite transcendent. This is also the central issue for ecclesiology. In this task, ecclesiology must avoid two kinds of reductionism: sociological and theological.

Komonchak does not believe that ecclesiologists can engage the central problem of ecclesiology unless they enter into conversation with social theorists and appropriate from them the categories to speak about the church as a social phenomenon which, theologically speaking, exists in response to God’s call and as such is a created sign and instrument of God’s redemptive purpose in the world. This claim rests on several presuppositions. First, the church is a human and social reality and as such it can be investigated like other human and social realities. It is not a suprahistorical or suprapersonal reality apart from the communities of men and women who gather as church. The referent of the word “church” is the *congregatio fidelium*. Second, insofar as the church is a human and social reality, it is a process of its self-realization and its ontology is intersubjective; that is, the ontology of the church lies in the shared subjectivity of its members. Third, the church comes to be when God’s gift offered in Christ and the Spirit is accepted by men and women for whom the Gospel constitutes the mutually shared meaning and value. Fourth, redemption is a theological notion which requires one to develop the category of
historical causality. The turn to the church as a human community or transformed subjectivity which results from the human response to God’s initiative in Christ and the Spirit is necessary for ecclesiology to become a systematic discipline. This methodological shift is at the same time Komonchak’s solution to the central problem in ecclesiology.

Since the church is a human and a social reality, and since its ontology is intersubjective, Komonchak advocates an approach to ecclesiological reflection which moves from the common to the unique. Ecclesiologists should begin with what the church shares with other human communities. This will enable them to identify both the common elements shared by the church and other human communities and also those which are unique to the church. Thus, ecclesiologists should start by considering what makes a group of human beings a community and then apply their findings to their understandings of the church.

Komonchak envisions ecclesiology as a critical systematic discipline whose goal is to articulate a theoretical understanding of the church. The object of ecclesiology is not merely to interpret the statements about the church from the tradition, but rather the whole of the church’s self-realization in history. The object of ecclesiology is the empirical church, and an ecclesiologist, for Komonchak, is both a theologian and a social theorist.

I believe that Komonchak’s foundations in ecclesiology discussed in this chapter contain a number of implications for contemporary ecclesiology. Their merit will be evaluated in chapter six.
CHAPTER 5

Joseph A. Komonchak’s Theology of the Local Church

As we have seen in chapter two, the Second Vatican Council made a significant contribution to the theology of the local church. By assigning a full ecclesial reality to local eucharistic gatherings of the faithful, especially those presided over by their bishop, the council implicitly said that local churches could not be viewed as mere administrative divisions of the universal church, and that the universal church was not like a corporation with local churches as its branch offices. Vatican II recovered the experience of the church from the first millennium, according to which the whole or universal church is a communion of local churches. Furthermore, by broadening the understanding of the church’s catholicity as a unity-in-diversity Vatican II raised an essential question: what is the relationship between the local churches and the universal church? Without resolving this issue, the council asserted that there exists a relationship of mutual interdependence between the local church and the church universal. Thus, the notion of the local church as fully church though not the whole church, the understanding of the universal church as a *communio ecclesiarum*, the notion of the mutual relationship between the local churches and the church universal, and the attribution of the church’s catholicity not only to the universal church but also to local churches are the key achievements of Vatican II with regard to the theology of the local church.

Having discussed Joseph Komonchak’s views on conciliar hermeneutics and his interpretation of Vatican II’s ecclesiology in chapter three, and the methodological foundations for his ecclesiology in chapter four, this study will now continue by presenting Komonchak’s theology of the local church. Theology of the local church is a topic where he has applied the
insights he developed about method in ecclesiology. He has published nine articles in which he explicitly explores the theology of the local church.\(^1\) They will be the main focus of this chapter, although a few have already been referred to in the previous chapter.

The present chapter will have a two-fold structure. In the first part I will lay out Komonchak’s understanding of the council’s treatment of the local church. This will be followed by a discussion of how he received and further advanced what the council provided in terms of the theology of the local church.

5.1. **KOMONCHAK ON VATICAN II’S TREATMENT OF THE LOCAL CHURCH**

Even without providing a systematic or a fully coherent treatment of the theology of the local church, the Second Vatican Council generated enormous interest in this topic.\(^2\)

Komonchak speaks about a shift, even about a “Copernican revolution”\(^3\) initiated by Vatican II


in this area. He notes that at the start of the council Catholic theology of the church was dominated by a “universalistic ecclesiology.” Theologians spoke simply about the “church” in the singular and they usually had in mind the universal church—the worldwide community and organization governed by the pope and bishops in communion with him. The local church only rarely appeared as a topic in ecclesiological writings. Komonchak illustrates this with a reference to a passage from an encyclical *Mystici corporis* of Pius XII which says,

> What we have thus far said of the universal Church must be understood also of the individual communities of Christians, both Latin and Oriental, from which the one Catholic Church is made up [ex quibus una constat ac *componitur Catholica Ecclesia*]. For they too are ruled by Jesus Christ through the power and voice of their respective bishops. Hence, bishops must not only be considered as the nobler members of the universal Church since they are united by a very special bond to the divine Head of the whole Body and are rightly called “the principal parts of the members of the Lord”; but besides, as far as his own diocese is concerned, each one, as a true shepherd feeds the flock entrusted to him and rules it in the name of Christ. But in exercising this office, they are not fully autonomous, but are subordinate to the lawful authority of the Roman Pontiff, although they enjoy the ordinary power of jurisdiction that they receive directly from the same Supreme Pontiff.⁵

Komonchak points out several elements in this text which are characteristic of the universalistic ecclesiology. The word “church” in this passage is reserved for the universal church. Dioceses over which bishops preside are not designated as churches but as individual communities of Christians. Moreover, although this text affirms that bishops enjoy ordinary jurisdiction over their flocks, it asserts that this jurisdiction is derived not from their ordination or by reference to their local churches, but from appointment by the pope. Thus it does not surprise Komonchak

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⁴ Komonchak, “The Theology of the Local Church,” 36; see also “The Local Church,” 320.

that some theologians and canonists during the pontificate of Pius XII proposed conceiving the church as one great diocese governed by a single universal bishop.⁶

What Komonchak does find surprising, however, is that, in spite of this universalistic ecclesiology exercising so much influence in the centuries prior to Vatican II, only a few years after the council there was a shift in Catholic ecclesiology which re-validated the local church and re-envisioned the one Catholic Church as the communion of local churches. He credits Vatican II for providing the basis for this shift through several emphases in its ecclesiology. He considers the council’s affirmation in Lumen gentium 23 that the one church exists only in and out of the local churches to be the primary factor in this shift.⁷ Other factors Komonchak includes are: the focus on the spiritual principles of the church realized in local communities; the renewed understanding of the eucharistic assembly as the highest realization of the church; the redefinition of catholicity as diversity-in-unity; the re-validation of the role of the bishop and of episcopal collegiality; ecumenical renewal; the challenge of inculturation; and the emphasis on the responsibility of all Christians for the life and mission of the church.⁸

A. Terminology

Komonchak’s treatment of the theology of the local church usually starts with a note on terminology.⁹ Like other theologians, he points out that Vatican II was inconsistent in its use of

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⁶ Komonchak, “The Theology of the Local Church,” 36–37; see also “The Local Church,” 320; “The Culture and History as the Material Conditions of the Genesis of the Local Church,” 49. Komonchak does not supply the names of the theologians and canonists he has in mind.

⁷ Komonchak, “The Culture and History as the Material Conditions of the Genesis of the Local Church,” 50.


the terms “local” and “particular” church. His view on the significance of a theologian’s preference for one or the other of these terms underwent development. In his 1980 article “Ministry and the Local Church,” he said that “the inconsistency in the conciliar vocabulary makes the choice of regular vocabulary somewhat arbitrary and the choice of one or another of these terms by commentators does not by itself seem to imply any major theological differences.” In his 1986 paper “Toward a Theology of the Local Church” he first rearticulated the earlier position that theologians’ choice of terminology is marked by certain arbitrariness, but then he stated that this choice on the part of theologians nevertheless often “reflects certain important theological options,” such as how one understands what should enter into the theological definition of the local church. As I will show later, this development had an impact on how Komonchak conceives the central question in the theology of the local church.

From Komonchak’s writings it appears that this development was brought about by an essay of Hervé Legrand, in which Legrand criticized the decision in the 1983 revised Code of Canon Law to reserve the term “particular church” for a diocese. This decision in the Code seems to have followed the rationale given by Henri de Lubac. Since “particular” and “universal” are lexicographical contraries, Legrand argues that this can lead to the conclusion that universality is a reality extrinsic to particular churches. For Legrand, this would, however, have implications for how the local church is understood.

10. The issue of terminological inconsistency was discussed in chapter 2, pp. 28–30.
13. Komonchak, “Toward a Theology of the Local Church,” 15; see also “The Local Church,” 322.
be a false universality. In contrast to de Lubac, he understands Vatican II as assigning greater theological significance to socio-cultural particularity. He thus prefers to use the term “local church” all the time and to qualify it with such terms as “diocesan” or “parochial” when necessary. Komonchak became persuaded by Legrand’s argument on this point and has followed his choice of terminology, hoping that context would make it clear as to which ecclesial body he is referring.\textsuperscript{16}

B. Komonchak’s Understanding of Vatican II on the Local Church

For Komonchak, the council’s theological concerns with regard to the theology of the local church are more important than the terminology the council employed. He identifies two such concerns: the first is the assertion that “in its distinctive and constitutive principles, the Church is realized in local Churches”; and the second is the contention that “it is in the distinctive social and cultural conditions of local Churches that the Church’s catholicity is concretely realized.”\textsuperscript{17} I will now expound on how Komonchak understands these two concerns.

\textit{i. The church is realized in the local churches}

Komonchak considers \textit{Lumen gentium} 23, 26, 28, and \textit{Christus Dominus} 11 to be the principal conciliar texts pertaining to the theology of the local church. They represent some important instances in which the universalistic ecclesiology generally prevalent in the conciliar texts gave way to an ecclesiology focused on the local church. These texts indicate in what way the universal church comes to be. The focus is on dioceses (\textit{LG} 23, \textit{CD} 11) and on infra-
diocesan gatherings for the celebration of the Eucharist (*LG* 26, 28). The council refers to both of these as churches.  

Komonchak understands these texts as offering a theological vision of the church’s self-constitution. In them, he finds what he refers to as the spiritual, theological, or generative principles of the church. They make the church a theological reality, a reality different from any other human community. Thus, the church is where these principles exist as formal principles of a community. These principles are: the call of God, the grace of the Holy Spirit, the preaching of the Gospel, the celebration of the Eucharist, the fellowship of love, and the apostolic ministry.

Komonchak understands the attention the council gave to these distinctive spiritual principles of the church as a repudiation of an ecclesiology that focuses mainly on the institutional dimensions of the church, namely, on the identification and distribution of authority.

In Komonchak’s view, Vatican II did more than merely renew and direct its attention to the spiritual principles that generate the church. The council also emphasized that these principles generate the church not on some abstract level, but only in local communities of faith. Two texts are fundamental in this regard. The first is *Lumen gentium* 23. The pertinent section of the article states:

> Collegiate unity is also apparent in the mutual relations of each bishop to individual dioceses and with the universal church. . . . The individual bishops are the visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular Churches, which are constituted after the model of the universal Church; it is in these and formed out of them that the one and

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unique Catholic Church exists. And for that reason precisely each bishop represents his own Church, whereas all, together with the pope, represent the whole Church in a bond of peace, love and unity.\textsuperscript{21}

Komonchak points out that here the council describes dioceses as churches—unlike \textit{Mystici corporis} in the passage discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Moreover, this text firmly asserts that there is a relationship of reciprocity between the one Catholic Church and the individual churches. At the same time Komonchak acknowledges that the affirmations of this reciprocity formulated in the expression that the particular churches image the universal church while the universal church exists only in and out of the particular churches appear to be in tension. The problem he perceives here is that these affirmations are simply juxtaposed and it is never systematically explained how both can be true at the same time. In fact, the debate about which side has priority, whether the universal or the local church, is due to a large extent to this juxtaposition. For Komonchak, the council left the task of clarifying these two assertions to theologians.\textsuperscript{22}

Komonchak himself offers such a clarification in his writings. It centers on the statement that particular churches are constituted after the model of the universal church. Agreeing with Hervé Legrand,\textsuperscript{23} Komonchak does not think that this phrase should be interpreted in the sense of Platonism as if the local churches were reproductions of some ideal church.\textsuperscript{24} Instead, he argues

\textsuperscript{21}Collegialis unio etiam in mutuis relationibus singulorum episcoporum cum particularibus ecclesiis ecclesiaeque universalis apararet. . . . Episcopi autem singuli visibile principio et fundamentum sunt unitatis in suis ecclesiis particularibus, ad imaginem ecclesiae universalis formatis in quibus et ex quibus una et unica ecclesia catholica existit. Qua de causa singuli episcopi suam ecclesiam, omnes autem simul cum papa totam ecclesiam repraesentant in vinculo pacis, amoris et unitatis.

\textsuperscript{22}Komonchak, “The Theology of the Local Church,” 38; “The Local Church,” 325.

\textsuperscript{23}Legrand, “La réalisation de l’Eglise en un lieu,” 152.

\textsuperscript{24}See Komonchak, “Towards a Theology of the Local Church,” 17; “The Epistemology of Reception,” 198.
that the expression “the model of the universal church” in *Lumen gentium* 23 refers to “the normative pattern that must be realized in any concrete community if it is rightly to be called the Church.” Komonchak identifies this pattern with the generative principles of the church’s self-realization. He explains that these principles

pre-exist any particular church only in the fashion in which the divine intention pre-exists the Church *tout court* or in which a “form” may be said to pre-exist the matter in which it is received; but this reception [of these principles] is precisely what is needed for a concrete reality called the Church to exist, and this happens only in the churches. Since these principles generate all local churches, they also generate the universal church.

The second fundamental text, which Komonchak uses to argue that the spiritual principles generate the church not on an abstract level but only in local communities of faith, is *Lumen gentium* 26. The relevant portion of the article says,

The bishop, invested with the fullness of the sacrament of Orders, is “the steward of the grace of the supreme priesthood,” above all in the Eucharist, which he himself offers, or ensures that it is offered, from which the Church ever derives its life and on which it thrives. This Church of Christ is really present in all legitimately organized local groups of the faithful, which, in so far as they are united to their pastors, are also quite appropriately called Churches in the New Testament.

Komonchak understands this text to refer to infradiocesan eucharistic assemblies such as parishes or other authorized communities. This passage recalls and explains the biblical

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26. Ibid.
28. Episcopus, plenitudine sacramenti ordinis insignitus, est “oeconomus gratiae supremi sacerdotii,” praesertim in eucharistia, quam ipse offert vel offerri curat, et qua continuo vivit et crescit ecclesia. Haec Christi ecclesia vere adest in omnibus legitimis fidelium congregationibus localibus, quae, pastoribus suis adhaerentes, et ipsae in novo testamento ecclesiae vocantur. The text in the quotation marks is from a prayer of episcopal consecration in the Byzantine rite: *Euchologion to mega*, (Rome 1873), 139.
29. In support of this position, Komonchak references a *relatio* of the Vatican II doctrinal commission which states, “Consideratur . . . Ecclesia particularis praesertim infra diocesim, sive sit paroecialis, sive alia ratione...
grounds for calling such assemblies churches. They are called churches not by convention but because the constitutive principles of the church—the apostolic ministry, the gospel of Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the Eucharist—are present in them.\textsuperscript{30}

These two passages from \textit{Lumen gentium} are in Komonchak’s view basic for the council’s re-validation of the local church. They portray the one Catholic church as the communion of faith, hope, and love, and as the community that assembles around the spiritual principles that generate the church. The essential point for Komonchak is that this mystery of communion is only realized locally in the many local churches. When such churches gather, the universal church is realized. It is present and active in them. It is built out of them, and comes to be in and out of them.\textsuperscript{31}

Komonchak joins his voice to a number of commentators on Vatican II such as Emmanuel Lanne, Louis Bouyer, and Hervé Legrand\textsuperscript{32} and notes that “this vision represents something like a Copernican revolution in ecclesiology.”\textsuperscript{33} He understands this expression to mean that

\begin{quote}
convocetur, semper tamen sub dependentia ab Episcopo.” \textit{AS} 3/1: 253; cited in Komonchak, “The Local Church and the Church Catholic,” 423.


33. Komonchak, “Ministry and the Local Church,” 58; see also “Toward a Theology of the Local Church,” 17; “The Local Realization of the Church,” 78; “The Local Church,” 321; “The Local Church and the Church Catholic,” 432; “The Culture and History as the Material Conditions of the Genesis of the Local Church,” 50.
\end{quote}
the Church is not universal in the manner of a transnational corporation which from a central office establishes identical branches all over the world. Nor is the local Church “a section of a vaster administrative body, one part fitted to other parts in order to form a larger whole, each of these parts remaining exterior to the others . . .” The universal, catholic Church arises, if you will, from below, because in every local Church the full reality of what is called “the Church” is realized . . . The Church universal comes to be out of the mutual reception and communion of local Churches. The Church universal is the communion of local Churches.34

Komonchak considers this view of the universal church at least as a counterweight to the process of centralization and uniformity operative in the church for centuries.35 This view also grounds what will be later called an ascending approach to the relationship between the local churches and the church universal, according to which the initial attention in ecclesiology is focused on the local churches.

ii. The concrete catholicity of the church

In Komonchak’s understanding, Vatican II enlarged the notion of the church’s catholicity. In the conciliar documents the catholicity or universality of the church does not simply mean that the church exists throughout the whole world; rather it is a theological principle which “refers to the Church’s effort to foster, purify, confirm, elevate, and take up what is good in the abilities, resources, and customs of the peoples among whom it arises.”36 Komonchak finds this vision operative in a number of Vatican II texts. The most pertinent of them is Lumen gentium 13 which states:


This character of universality which adorns the People of God is a gift from the Lord himself whereby the Catholic Church ceaselessly and efficaciously seeks for the return of all humanity and all its goods under Christ the Head in the unity of his Spirit.

In virtue of this catholicity each part contributes its own gifts to other parts and to the whole Church, so that the whole and each of the parts are strengthened by the common sharing of all things and by the common effort to attain fullness in unity.  

Komonchak argues that several statements in the council’s Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad gentes*, can also be read as describing the concrete catholicity of the church. He references the following passages:

On that day [Pentecost] was foreshadowed the union of all peoples in the catholicity of the faith by means of the Church of the New Alliance, a Church which speaks every language, understands and embraces all tongues in charity, and thus overcomes the dispersion of Babel. (# 4)

Both Christ and the Church which bears witness to him transcend the distinctions of race and nationality, and so cannot be considered as strangers to anyone or in any place. (# 8)

[In order to offer salvation to those who have not heard the Gospel yet, the Church must imitate Christ who] by his incarnation committed himself to the particular and cultural circumstances of the men among whom he lived. (# 10)

The Christian faithful who have been gathered into the Church from every nation and “are not marked off from the rest of men either by country, by language, or by political institutions,” should live for God and Christ according to the honorable usages of their race. (# 15)

[The young churches] borrow from the customs, traditions, wisdom, teaching, arts and sciences of their people everything which could be used to praise the glory of the Creator, manifest the grace of the savior, or contribute to the right ordering of Christian life. (# 22)

Komonchak notes that in these texts the council envisions the church as a concrete universal, one that exists not despite, but on account of the variety of the local churches. 

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37. Hic universalitatis character, qui populum Dei condecorat, ipsius Domini donum est, quo catholica ecclesia efficaciter et perpetuo tendit ad recapitulandam totam humanitatem cum omnibus bonis eius, sub capite Christo, in unitate Spiritus eius. Vi huius catholicitatis, singulæ partes propria dona ceteris partibus et toti ecclesiae afferunt, ita ut totum et singulæ partes augeantur ex omnibus invicem communicantibus et ad plenitudinem in unitate conspirantibus.
5.2. **The Central Issue**

Komonchak distinguishes two approaches to the theology of the local church. The first, which he calls *classic*, concentrates on identifying what is meant by the noun “church” and by the adjectives “particular/local” and “universal.” This approach begins by determining what the church is through identification of the elements or principles which constitute the church and distinguish it from all other human communities. The full reality of the church, not just a part of it, exists wherever such principles are the formal principles of a community.

The second movement in the classic approach is to determine where a normative instance of an individual church can be found. Komonchak notes that the answer to this question has ranged from the two or three gathered in the name of Jesus, through small communities, parishes, dioceses, to regional, national, and international groups of dioceses. The most common answer, however, has been a diocese; that is, a community of the faithful presided over by a bishop, and it has most often been designated as particular church. In the classic approach all other communities of Christians are then related to this normative instance of an individual church.

Komonchak does not think that the use of the term “particular” for a diocese as the normative instance of an individual church is very illuminating because it adds little to what is already known from identifying the church with the constitutive principles that generate it. The

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40. Komonchak points out Henri de Lubac’s *Les églises particulières dans l’Église universelle* as an example of this approach. See “The Local Church and the Church Catholics,” 417.

41. Komonchak, “The Local Church and the Church Catholic,” 417.

42. Ibid., 417–18.
only thing that is added is the identification of apostolic ministry with a bishop. The term particular does not say anything about the individuating principles of a specific church. For these principles the classic approach uses the term “local,” which refers to the socio-cultural and historical factors. While the generative principles are understood as theological or divine, the individuating principles are understood as just socio-cultural or human.43

The third movement in the classic approach is to identify the one church which exists in the individual churches. Since the individual churches are fully churches, not just parts of the one church, this one church is understood as more than the mere sum-total of all the individual churches. On this account, the one church is called “universal” because it is defined by the generative principles which are found in all individual churches, and by abstracting from what distinguishes them from one another. Because of the role the ministry of the Bishop of Rome and of the college of bishops play in this view, Komonchak notes that the universal church could be described as the church governed by the pope and the college of bishops. A theology of the local church in this approach thus often becomes a reflection on the relationship between a diocese and the universal church, or between the authority of an individual bishop and that of the pope. In this account, the terms universal and catholic often carry the same meaning.44

Komonchak illustrates the classic approach with the example of Henri de Lubac’s Les églises particulières dans l’Église universelle.45 As shown in chapter two,46 de Lubac strictly distinguishes between the terms “particular” and “local” and argues that it is the former which

43. Komonchak, “The Local Church and the Church Catholic,” 418.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., 435–36.
46. See chapter 2, pp. 29–30.
should be used to designate the normative instance of an individual church—a diocese. For de Lubac, only spiritual and hierarchical considerations should enter into the definition of the particular church. In other words, de Lubac’s criterion of a particular church is essentially theological. His criterion for local churches is socio-cultural, and he understands them as groupings of particular churches.

Even though Komonchak considers de Lubac’s position to be nuanced and one that pays attention to “the importance of concrete local realizations of catholicity,” he does question some of de Lubac’s presuppositions. Komonchak groups into two columns what characterizes de Lubac’s descriptions of the particular church and of the local church. In the first column, which describes the particular church, he places the following adjectives: theological, fundamental, divine, supernatural, unity, centripetal. In the second column, the one describing the local church, the adjectives are: socio-cultural, useful, human, natural, variety, centrifugal.

The most striking feature of these lists, for Komonchak, is how strictly particularity and locality are distinguished. In Komonchak’s view, “the result is that the particular church appears to float in mid-air, constituted solely by theological, divine, supernatural elements.”

For Komonchak, the classic approach to the theology of the local church is dominated by giving attention to the noun “church” while the dimensions referred to by adjectives (local, particular, universal) are left underdeveloped. He says:

About the only thing particular about the adjective “particular” is the presence of a single bishop, while “universal” is defined by abstraction. The socio-cultural and historical elements that may enter into the definition of “local” are not regarded as ecclesiologically

47. Komonchak, “The Local Church and the Church Catholic,” 435; see also “The Local Church,” 323.


49. Ibid.
significant except at best in some secondary sense. They are not among the constitutive principles even of the “particular” church, and they are precisely what is abstracted from in the derivation of the abstract and formal universality of the one Church that exists in all the particular churches.\footnote{Ibid., 419.}

The shortcoming of this approach, in Komonchak’s view, is the lack of treatment of what diversifies individual churches, and in classifying what diversifies them as something accidental and not pertaining to the substance of the church.\footnote{Ibid.}

From this discussion of what Komonchak calls the classic approach to the theology of the local church it should be clear that in his view, the central issue in the theology of the local church is to ascertain which elements should enter into the theological definition of a local church. The issue is ultimately about the ecclesiological significance that should be assigned to the elements of locality, by which Komonchak means political, social, and cultural particularity.\footnote{Komonchak, “The Local Church,” 322–23.}

A. Theological Significance of Locality

Another approach to the theology of the local church, the one that Komonchak advocates although he does not have a name for it, includes from the start the recognition of the “dimensions of local particularity and their relationships with one another within the one genuinely catholic Church.”\footnote{Komonchak, “The Local Church and the Church Catholic,” 419.} In this approach there is a preference for the adjectives “local” and “catholic” over “particular” and “universal.” This preference, for Komonchak, is not arbitrary; rather, it is based on “a different answer to the question whether local individuating
elements enter into the very constitution of a local church and whether the Church’s catholicity is adequately expressed as merely abstract universality.”  

As I have shown in the previous chapter, Komonchak distinguishes two principles or moments in the genesis of the church: objective and subjective. The former refers to one generation’s communication of what it means to be church to another generation, and the latter refers to the reception and appropriation of this communication. The church happens at the intersection of these two moments. It happens when God’s gift is received and appropriated as a response to the challenges, problems, and resources of specific persons, times, and places. These challenges, problems and resources are similar and at the same time they vary according to different social, political, and cultural contexts.

Komonchak argues that when one conceives the church’s genesis in these terms, especially if one focuses on the human acts by which the church comes to be, one’s focus necessarily shifts from the universal church to the local church. This is so because those human acts are the acts of concrete men and women living in concrete cultural, social and political milieu. The universal church does not arise in the abstract but concretely.

It is not the word of God in general that gathers the Church in faith, but the word as preached in specific interpretative contexts and received as a response to concrete threats to authentic human meaning. The Church’s hope overcomes quite concrete experiences of the demonic power of evil in persons and structures. The Church does not celebrate the Eucharist in general; it celebrates it in quite concrete human groups, and the

54. Ibid.
55. Cf. chapter 4, pp. 142–45.
communion effected in and through such a Eucharist overcomes quite concrete experiences of alienation. 58

This is Komonchak’s argument why it is not legitimate to make locality—by which Komonchak means the social and cultural differences among the churches—a secondary theological principle in the process of the church’s self-realization. In contrast to de Lubac, locality is for Komonchak an intrinsic dimension of the actualization of local churches and therefore it should enter into the theological definition of the church. 59

For Komonchak, the existential priority of the local churches can be obscured, however, if church’s unity is considered in abstract terms. This happens when an argument is constructed that the church is one because the same Word of God, or the same Christ, or the same authority of the Scriptures and Tradition is present in all the churches. For Komonchak, this is all true but, he adds, “its truth is only significant if it is concrete.” 60 For him, the objective principles are effective principles of unity in and among the churches “only when and insofar as they mediate the gathering of individuals into local communities and of the local communities into a catholic unity.” 61 Komonchak disagrees that the objective principles effect the unity among the churches “in virtue of some prior, supposedly universal meaning, ascertainable and interpretable without reference to concrete situations and problems.” 62 Instead, they function in this way “in virtue of their capacity to illumine and to transform a nearly infinite variety of situations and problems.” 63

58. Komonchak, “Towards a Theology of the Local Church,” 25; see also “Ministry and the Local Church,” 69.


60. Komonchak, “Ministry and the Local Church,” 70.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.
The church’s unity is thus realized “‘from below’ in the unity realized in and among the various and different communities.”

Komonchak shows how his position on the significance of locality for the theology of the local church differs from that of Giuseppe Colombo. In Colombo’s view, it is not the sociological differences among the churches, but rather the generative principles of the church which provide for both—the unity and the plurality of the local churches. This plurality arises through the varying interplay of these principles and through differences in Christian experience. For Colombo, cultures cannot make the church; only the generative principles can. Thus, cultures cannot be the constitutive element that characterizes local churches. Cultural characterization of local churches can only be conventional and therefore superficial, even misleading. Colombo’s view resembles that of de Lubac. In both cases, geographical and socio-cultural designations are secondary at best; in the case of Colombo, they appear to be theologically insignificant categories.

Komonchak argues that Colombo’s understanding of the place of locality in the theology of the local church “runs the danger of regarding the human element in the construction of the

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid.


Church as merely passive and receptive." Moreover, Colombo’s view is for Komonchak an illustration of the role one’s anthropology plays in one’s ecclesiology. He explains:

If the encounter between the gospel and culture is simply the contestazione between grace and sin, then Colombo’s view can stand. But if the gospel finds in the various cultures not only what needs to be “purified” and “elevated,” but also what can be “promoted” and “taken up” (see LG 13), then the encounter is far more complex.

Komonchak wants to be clear that he agrees with both Colombo and de Lubac that “it is the gospel and not the cultural particularities which primarily generate a Church.” For him, “the local factors . . . do not constitute the local Church qua Church, [but] they do enter into the constitution of the local Church qua local.” Komonchak maintains, however, that a local church comes to be in an encounter between the gospel and a particular culture, and he concludes that “this encounter, as it differs from other encounters of gospel and culture, must also generate a constitutively different local church.”

Komonchak’s conception of the church’s genesis also carries implications for how one thinks about the “nature” and the “mission” of the church, and how one relates “the church” and “world.” First, for Komonchak, it is not possible to separate the “nature” and the “mission” of the church, “as if there were first a moment in which the Church becomes what it is and a second

67. Ibid., 437.
68. Ibid., 439. The quoted words are from Wolfgang Beinert, “Die Una Catholica und die Partikularkirchen,” Theologie und Philosophie 42 (1967): 1–21, at 5.
69. Komonchak, “The Local Church and the Church Catholic,” 439; emphasis added.
in which it looks around at the world to see what it might bring to it.”

Agreeing with Italian ecclesiologist Severino Dianich, Komonchak contends that “the Church’s nature essentially consists in its historical mission.” Thus, in an ecclesiology it is incorrect to treat the church’s mission in a late chapter after the church’s nature had already been treated from the beginning.

Second, in discussions about the church’s mission to the world, Komonchak explains that “world” does not refer primarily to the physical place, but rather to the human self-project. Consequently, to relate the church and the world is to correlate two projects which take place simultaneously: the Christian self-project and the collective human self-project. The Christian self-project is an occasion of the self-realization of the world, and it is distinct from it in that the former centers on Jesus Christ.

B. Meaning of Catholicity

In addition to the central importance of locality, another significant category in Komonchak’s theology of the local church is that of catholicity. In both the Apostles’ Creed and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed the character of catholicity is attributed to the church. Theological reflection on the church’s catholicity has varied over centuries with the emphasis on either the qualitative or extensive catholicity. The former emphasis was prominent in the patristic and medieval period, and the latter in the post-Reformation period. A qualitative notion


74. Komonchak, “The Local Church and the Church Catholic,” 444.


76. For the meaning of “qualitative catholicity” see chapter 2, pp. 34–37.
of catholicity was retrieved in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and made its way into the Vatican II documents.\textsuperscript{77}

As discussed above, Komonchak understands Vatican II as having enlarged the meaning of the church’s catholicity. The council departed from the interpretation of catholicity as simple geographical extension or as worldwide uniformity and operated instead with the notion of catholicity as fullness-in-unity. This conception of catholicity sees value in diversity and particularity, especially in terms of culture. The conclusion Komonchak draws is that “if catholicity is considered to be part of the fundamental structure of the Church and if it is taken to mean something more than geographical universality, then diversity is among the fundamental, theologically essential elements of the concretely catholic Church.”\textsuperscript{78}

Komonchak points out that this understanding of catholicity has repercussions for understanding the unity of the church. He writes,

> when unity and catholicity are practically identified, locality can only be considered as the ecclesiological equivalent of individuating matter in scholastic philosophy, that is, it is left without intelligible content. When catholicity is understood to add to unity dimensions of plurality and integration, locality (that is, cultural and historical particularity) is seen to be an inner dimension and requirement of catholicity, which is now understood as “fullness of unity” and, so far from a denial of the unity of the Church, as the most splendid illustration of its concretely universal character.\textsuperscript{79}

For Komonchak, locality is by no means an antithesis of catholicity, but rather its very realization. The church’s catholicity is realized in and out of the local churches.\textsuperscript{80} The unity of the church, then, cannot be conceived as a one-way dependency of some churches on other

\textsuperscript{77} See Ibid.

\textsuperscript{78} Komonchak, “The Local Church,” 324.

\textsuperscript{79} Komonchak, “The Local Church and the Church Catholic,” 445.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.
churches, but it must be achieved through an active common sharing among all the local churches presided over by the bishop of Rome. Based on this understanding of catholicity Komonchak contends that “the role of the Bishop of Rome is not best conceived as one of mediating between a local church and the universal Church, imagined as something above all the local churches, but between one local church and the other local churches.”

For Komonchak, the catholicity of the church is not something given, but a task that is always to be achieved anew. This necessarily follows from his conception of the church’s genesis. Since the church comes to be through an interaction of the objective and the subjective principle, and since the reception of the gospel is a continual task on the part of the believers, the realization of the church’s catholicity cannot be something given once for all; rather it must be an ongoing process, something to be achieved anew by every generation of believers.

Komonchak considers this dynamic understanding of catholicity to be a challenge for the church. On the one hand, it is a challenge for many in positions of leadership because of their tendency toward uniformity and top-down leadership. On the other hand, it is also a challenge for the local churches because they often tend to consider their particularity so normative that the particularity of other local churches is considered to be at best tolerable. Against these two tendencies Komonchak emphasizes that catholicity “is not simply variety or diversity.” It refers, rather, to a whole, a whole that “interrelates and integrates multiplicity.”

82. Komonchak, “The Local Church and the Church Catholic,” 442.
83. Komonchak, “The Local Church and the Church Catholic,” 446; see also “Culture and History as the Material Conditions of the Genesis of the Local Church,” 63.
84. Komonchak, “Culture and History as the Material Conditions of the Genesis of the Local Church,” 53; see also “The Theology of the Local Church,” 49.
Komonchak is aware that the theology of the local church he envisions with the significance it assigns to local particularity and diversity also has its potential downsides. It runs the danger that local churches become closed in on themselves by becoming culturally assimilated to the point that they will lose the sense of belonging to the catholic fullness. In addition, one can easily conceive that when the expressions of beliefs, worship, and practices become more localized, it will be more difficult for the churches to recognize each other as belonging to the same communion, and they may become isolated from one another. Furthermore, there are also temptations of ethnic, racial, political, or nationalistic exclusivism. Komonchak points out the examples of ethnic cleansings in Burundi, Rwanda, and in the former Yugoslavia, which took place toward the end of the second millennium. He considers these events, which were in part religiously motivated and had heavy Christian involvement, to be the miserable failure of genuine catholicity.

To counteract such dangers, which seem to be a real possibility for a theology of the local church that emphasizes socio-cultural particularities in the self-realization of local churches, Komonchak proposes to conceive catholicity as “redemptive integration.” He thinks that the shift in the understanding of catholicity from geographical universality to qualitative wholeness, which took place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, will remain incomplete as long as ecclesiologists will continue to emphasize catholicity in its formal and universal elements and


86. See Komonchak, “Culture and History as the Material Conditions of the Genesis of the Local Church,” 54.
see it almost exclusively in theological and ecclesiocentric terms as a dimension of the church’s mystery. Komonchak is critical of the state of reflection on catholicity because

the focus tends to remain on the inner inclusiveness and variety of the Church, and there is strikingly little discussion of the implications of catholicity for the redemption of history and society, for the role the Church must play as the sacrament not only of intimate union with God but also of the unity of the whole human race.87

Komonchak’s view of catholicity as redemptive integration is synonymous to the notion of the church as sacrament. Catholicity is in this sense perceived as “a characteristic that, as a ‘sign,’ displays what the world of God’s creation is supposed to be like and that, as an instrument, serves the realization of that purpose.”88 With the notion of catholicity as redemptive integration Komonchak wants to communicate that the church should make a difference in the world. He cautions that the emphasis in the church’s genesis upon racial, ethnic, or cultural distinctiveness can be an obstacle to such vision of catholicity. For him, in order to achieve a reconciled and integrated communion, cultural distinctiveness needs to be relativized. Without such an achievement the church for Komonchak would not be genuinely catholic.89

5.3. CHURCH LOCAL AND UNIVERSAL

A. Two Paradigms

An ecclesiology like that of Komonchak, which focuses initial attention on the local churches, construes the relationship between the local church and the universal church differently than an ecclesiology which starts with the church universal. Komonchak calls the latter paradigm a “descending” approach, or an ecclesiology “from above.” In it, the relationship

between the universal church and the local churches is that of a whole to its parts. The whole is
prior to the parts, and the parts participate in the nature which only the whole fully possesses.
Komonchak likens this view to a modern transnational corporation where, organizationally
speaking, all authority is concentrated in a central organ from where it is then distributed into
field offices.90

Komonchak calls his own approach an “ascending” ecclesiology, or an ecclesiology from
below. Here the whole is not conceived prior to its parts but it

comes to be, is constituted by, in, and out of the realizations of its many constituents. All
the intrinsic and distinctive elements that constitute the reality are realized individually,
and the relationships that make the individual realizations a single whole are grounded in
a common participation in one reality constitutive of them all.91

On this view, the universal church is not a reality separate from the local churches; rather, it is
the communion of local Churches.92

Komonchak does not think that it is much of an exaggeration to say that these two views
mark a movement that took place in Catholic ecclesiology between the First and the Second
Vatican Councils, where Vatican I represents the descending and Vatican II the ascending
approach. He sees the descending approach to be the basis of Roman centralization in the
second millennium, and Vatican II as the effort to retrieve both theoretically and practically the
second view. Its consistency with his understanding of the church’s genesis is the main reason
why Komonchak considers the ascending approach to be superior.93 He does not deny, however,

91. Ibid.
92. Ibid.
that the descending view is present in the documents of Vatican II. Both views are found in the conciliar texts and after the council they have continued to shape the debates about the relationship of the universal church and local churches.

B. The Question of Priority

In the aftermath of Vatican II with its re-validation of the local church, ecclesiologists spilled plenty of ink on the question of what comes first—the local, or the universal church. Some have advocated the priority of the universal church. Catholic theologians who have spoken for the priority of the local church in explicit terms are few. Others have rejected the whole question as misguided and have spoken about the simultaneity of the local churches and the universal church and/or reciprocity that exists between them. This is also Komonchak’s view. For him, to pose the question of the relationship between the local and universal church in terms of priority is problematic because it tends to lead to one of two unacceptable assertions—that local churches are simply either subdivisions of the universal church, or that they come first and the universal church is simply a confederation of prior independent local churches. For


Komonchak, these positions are in conflict with Vatican II’s affirmations in *Lumen gentium* 23 and 26.97

In Komonchak’s view, the persistence of the question of priority is due to the ambiguous treatment of this issue by the council itself. He agrees that based on *Lumen gentium* 23 it is possible to approach the relationship between the universal church and the local churches in terms of priority. If the particular churches are in the image of the universal church, it does appear that the universal church has priority. The opposite, however, also seems to be the case if the universal church exists only in and out of the particular churches, as *Lumen gentium* 23 also contends. While both of these positions have been defended, Komonchak argues that to approach the issue of the relationship of the local churches and the universal church in terms of priority is a mistake.98 This approach, however, was advocated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in its letter “On Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion.”99

The letter sparked a vigorous debate among theologians, best known probably through the back-and-forth exchanges between Cardinals Ratzinger and Kasper.100

In Komonchak’s view the CDF’s letter makes many good points, especially in its initial section where it expounds the trinitarian and eucharistic grounds of ecclesial communion. He


also sees the CDF’s warning about the emphasis on the self-sufficiency of a particular church\textsuperscript{101} as a useful reminder of the danger of such a position “since in fact nearly every schism has originated from excessive emphasis on national, racial or ethnic particularity.”\textsuperscript{102} What follows, however, in the letter’s second section on the universal church and the particular churches Komonchak finds problematic; namely the congregation’s assertion that the universal church “is a reality ontologically and historically prior to every individual particular church.”\textsuperscript{103}

Komonchak sees this assertion as another way the CDF responded to what it perceived as a one-sided emphasis on the local church. Although the congregation did not mention anyone by name, Komonchak thinks it might have had in mind “various movements in favor of basic Christian communities and the communities which claim to be constructing ‘the Church from below.’”\textsuperscript{104} Although he acknowledges that the CDF’s concern is legitimate, Komonchak nevertheless thinks that “asserting priority on either side is surely a mistake.”\textsuperscript{105} He argues that it is a mistake both historically and theologically. The historical mistake concerns the interpretation of the event of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–13) and the theological mistake is with regard to the relationship of mutual interiority between the universal church and the local churches.

\textsuperscript{101} CDF, \textit{CN} 8.
\textsuperscript{102} Komonchak, “The Theology of the Local Church,” 41.
\textsuperscript{104} Komonchak, “The Local Church and the Church Catholic,” 430; “The Theology of the Local Church,” 40.
\textsuperscript{105} Komonchak, “The Local Church and the Church Catholic,” 431; see also “The Local Church,” 324.
Communionis notio illustrates what it means by the historical and ontological priority of the universal church through a reflection on Pentecost. After asserting that the universal church “is the mother not the product of the particular Churches” the letter states:

Furthermore, the church is manifested temporally on the day of Pentecost in the community of the 120 gathered around Mary and the Twelve Apostles, the representatives of the one unique church and the founders-to-be of the local churches, who have a mission directed to the world: from the first the church speaks all languages.

From the church, which in its origins and its first manifestation is universal, have arisen the different local churches as particular expressions of the one unique church of Jesus Christ. Arising within and out of the universal church, they have their ecclesiality in her and from her. Hence the formula of the Second Vatican Council: The Church in and formed out of the churches (ecclesia in et ex ecclesiis) is inseparable from this other formula, the churches in and formed out of the church (ecclesiae in et ex ecclesia).  

This text portrays the Pentecost church as the universal church, from which all local churches originated. This universal church is their mother.

Komonchak differs from the Congregation in his interpretation of the event of Pentecost. For him, the church that originates at Pentecost is “at once local and catholic,” and “the churches generated from that mother-church are the same Church, becoming catholic now concretely, in various other places.” Komonchak thus differs from the Congregation in two respects. First, he understands the church born at Pentecost to be simultaneously local and universal. Second, 


107. According to this understanding, the local church of Jerusalem about which we hear in the Acts of the Apostles is not identical with this Pentecostal church; rather it originates from it.

108. Komonchak, “The Local Church and the Church Catholic,” 432; see also “The Theology of the Local Church,” 43.
for him, *this* Pentecost church of Jerusalem is a mother in relation to other local churches, from which they were propagated “as if by cuttings and replanting.”\(^{109}\)

Komonchak has several reservations about the maternal metaphor as expounded in the Congregation’s letter. First, he does not think that this metaphor is compatible with the *in et ex quibus* phrase of *Lumen gentium* 23, according to which the universal church exists in and out of the particular churches. The metaphor is consistent only with the phrase *Ecclesiae in et ex Ecclesia*. Second, suggesting that the issue needs to be carefully studied, Komonchak doubts that referring to the universal church as the mother of particular churches is in line with the tradition of the early church. He contends that, historically, it was the local Church of Jerusalem which was considered to be the mother of all other churches, and jurisdictionally, it was the local Church of Rome. He also points out that in the debates preceding the schism between Catholics and Orthodox the relationship between these two maternities was often an issue, yet neither side turned to the notion of the universal church as the mother of both of them.\(^{110}\)

Since the CDF also affirms the relationship of mutual interiority between the universal church and the local churches,\(^{111}\) it is a puzzle, for Komonchak, how the question of priority can even arise. He says:

> If local church and universal church exist within one another, how is it possible to set them over-and-against one another as if they were distinct and the problem were how to relate them. Ontologically, (1) there cannot be a church except in time and place, gathering specific men and women in communion of faith, hope and love; and (2) a local community is not a church unless it is also universal or catholic in its constitutive principles: catholic both because the whole of the mystery of the church is realized in it

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111. CDF, *CN* 9.
and because the mystery that makes it a communion in Christ is the same mystery that makes every other community a communion in Christ.\textsuperscript{112}

Komonchak criticizes \textit{Communionis notio} for poorly representing the principle that apart from the local churches the universal church has only a notional existence. This is so because the Congregation’s letter did not elaborate on the council’s statement “\textit{ecclesia in et ex ecclesiis}” from \textit{Lumen gentium} 23. Instead this statement was counterbalanced with “\textit{ecclesiae in et ex ecclesia},” which the congregation took over from a speech of Pope John Paul II to the Roman Curia.\textsuperscript{113} It is unclear to Komonchak why this new phrase is necessary “since everything it appears to intend is already present in the conciliar affirmation about the ‘image of the universal church.’”\textsuperscript{114} Thus, he thinks that if this phrase is not complemented with the conciliar formulation “\textit{ecclesia in et ex ecclesiis}” the dialectical balance of \textit{Lumen gentium} 23 disappears.\textsuperscript{115}

Komonchak notes that the CDF appears to be particularly concerned with the claim that the universal church is “the result of a reciprocal recognition on the part of the particular churches.”\textsuperscript{116} He explains that the theologians who speak about reciprocal reception and recognition do not imagine this as some second moment in the realization of the ecclesial communion, wherein first there are independent particular churches which subsequently decide to form a federation. He thinks that all the theologians who used the language of reciprocal recognition would reject this idea. Instead, the language of reciprocal recognition wants to

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{112} Komonchak, “The Theology of the Local Church,” 42–43.
\item \textsuperscript{114} Komonchak, “The Theology of the Local Church,” 42
\item \textsuperscript{115} Komonchak, “À propos de la priorité de l’Église universelle,” 263.
\item \textsuperscript{116} CDF, \textit{CN} 8.
\end{enumerate}
communicate that “the mystery of communion that makes the church to be the church, whether
docally or universally, consists in the common incorporation of its members, together, into
Christ.”\textsuperscript{117}

Komonchak understands the universal church as the communion of the local churches. The universal church “does not result from” but “is the communion of the local churches.” It “is
their reciprocal reception of one another as all the beneficiaries of Christ’s word and grace.” The
universal church “is this common consciousness among all Christians and among all particular
churches,” and apart from this common consciousness it is “an abstraction.”\textsuperscript{118}

Komonchak offers an example to illustrate the notion of mutual interiority of the local
churches and the universal church. He takes it from human anatomy.

The body’s cells are alive only with the life of the whole organism, separated from which
they are no longer living members, but inorganic tissue. On the other hand, the body is
alive and functioning only in the living cells and as articulated in differentiated organs
and members. In the same way, the life of the local Churches is the life of the whole
Church, which has no existence except as realized and functioning in the varied and
diverse local Churches.\textsuperscript{119}

Komonchak believes that this analogy illustrates the mutual mediation between the local
churches and the universal church.

Komonchak notes that prior to the CDF’s letter \textit{Communionis notio} the question of the
relationship between the universal church and the local church was treated in the draft statement
on episcopal conferences prepared by the Congregation for Bishops.\textsuperscript{120} This draft also

\begin{footnotes}
\item[117] Komonchak, “The Theology of the Local Church,” 43.
\item[118] Ibid.
\item[119] Komonchak, “The Local Church,” 327.
\item[120] This draft statement is an \textit{Instrumentum laboris} or working paper titled “Theological and Juridical
Status of Episcopal Conferences,” and it was sent to all the bishops in the beginning of 1988. The focus of the
\end{footnotes}
articulated “the ontological and historical priority of the universal church with respect to the particular church,” and it asserted that the “Petrine primacy, understood as *plenitudo potestatis*, has no theological sense and coherence unless within the primacy of the one and universal church over particular and local churches.” Kononchak points out that Joseph Ratzinger argued the latter point in a similar way in one of his private writings: “[the] office of Peter and its responsibility could not exist if the universal Church had not existed before it. Otherwise it would be grasping at emptiness and would represent an absurd claim.” Komonchak concludes that “the two statements come close to implying that if the priority of the universal church were denied, the pope would have nothing to do.” The question of the priority of the universal church over the local church is thus in Komonchak’s view closely linked with the exercise of the Petrine ministry.

5.4. **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have presented Komonchak’s theology of the local church. This is the area of ecclesiology in which Komonchak most fully applied the insights he developed in regard to method in ecclesiology. I have shown that Komonchak advocates an ascending approach to

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statement is twofold: (1) the extent to which the actions of episcopal conferences are an exercise of collegiality, and (2) the nature of their teaching authority. The statement is a result of a study called for by the 1985 extraordinary Synod of Bishops. The draft statement was issued by the Congregation for Bishops but it was prepared in collaboration with the Congregations for the Doctrine of the Faith, for Eastern Churches, and for the Evangelization of Peoples, as well as by the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops. The original of the draft statement is in Italian.


ecclesiology—an approach in which the initial reflection focuses on the local church. He argues for this approach on methodological grounds. First, Komonchak conceives the church’s genesis, its coming-to-be, in terms of an interaction between two principles: the objective and the subjective. The objective principle is God’s offer of self and in terms of the church’s genesis it is embodied in one generation’s communication of the Gospel to the next. The subjective principle is the appropriation of the Gospel by that next generation. The church happens at the intersection between these two principles. Komonchak argues that when one conceives the church’s genesis in these terms, especially if one focuses on the human acts by which the church comes to be, one’s attention necessarily focuses on the local church, because the appropriation of the Gospel happens in the particularities of different communities. It happens in their social and cultural milieu. Thus, for Komonchak, it is not legitimate to make locality—by which he means the social and cultural differences among the churches—a secondary principle in the process of the church’s self-realization. In his view, locality enters into the theological definition of a concretely existing church.

Based on this conception of the church’s genesis, the whole church or the church universal is not something prior to the local churches; rather, it arises out of the local churches, out of their communion. In fact, Komonchak argues that the church universal is the communion of the local churches. He understands the relationship between the local churches and the church universal in terms of mutual interiority. For him, “the communion that constitutes the universal Church is precisely the mutual inclusion of all the local churches.”

The essential point, for Komonchak, is that this communion is realized only locally in the many local churches. In light

124. Komonchak, “The Local Church and the Church Catholic,” 442.
of the mutual interiority between the local churches and the universal church, he rejects the question of priority as a false one.

A qualitative understanding of the church’s mark of catholicity is another important characteristic of Komonchak’s theology of the local church. Komonchak conceives catholicity not as abstract universality or as uniformity, but as unity-in-diversity or as fullness-in-unity. On this account diversity and particularity among the local churches do not stand in opposition to the church’s unity. They are viewed as gifts with which churches enrich one another. The church’s unity arises from the integration of these gifts into a oneness which is a fullness, without abolishing diversity. Such a conception of catholicity is a constant challenge for local churches, and it is also an ongoing task.
CHAPTER 6

Joseph Komonchak’s Theology of the Local Church: Summary and Evaluation

Having presented Joseph A. Komonchak’s theology of the local church in the last chapter, I will now draw some conclusions about the importance of Komonchak’s work. This final chapter, which will consist of four sections, will seek to give a critical appraisal of Komonchak’s ecclesiology. Section one will recapitulate the main points of Komonchak’s thought developed throughout this study. Sections two and three will evaluate Komonchak’s work. They will follow a two-fold structure. Section two will focus on an evaluation of the foundations of his ecclesiology and section three on his theology of the local church. Each section will discuss Komonchak’s contribution and its significance. Section three will conclude with a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of Komonchak’s ecclesiological project. Section four will consist of concluding remarks for both this chapter and the dissertation as a whole.

6.1. SUMMARY OF THE MAIN POINTS

Komonchak’s ecclesiological project took shape in the context of the renewal in Catholic ecclesiology promoted by the Second Vatican Council. One area pertaining to Vatican II which occupied Komonchak’s scholarly interests has been the hermeneutics of the council.¹ The issues of Vatican II hermeneutics to which Komonchak has paid most attention are: (1) the responsibility of the council for the collapse of pre-Vatican II Catholicism; (2) the continuity and

¹. This study does not treat Komonchak’s studies on the history of Vatican II.
discontinuity of Vatican II with the tradition of the church; and (3) the dynamics between the “letter” and the “spirit” of the council.

Komonchak considers Vatican II responsible for the dissolution of pre-Vatican II Catholicism. In his understanding, the council called into question some of most important principles of the pre-Vatican II Catholicism, which in turn had an adverse effect on it. The key to Komonchak’s view is to distinguish between the council’s theological objectives and their sociological effects. Komonchak has argued that theologically the council wanted nothing more than a legitimate reform of the church. Sociologically, however, such reform caused something like a revolution in Catholicism.

Komonchak affirms both continuity and discontinuity with regard to the council and the tradition. From historiography he appropriated the notion of “event,” through which he approached this issue. In his view, an “event” is not just any occurrence but a noteworthy occurrence, one that represents novelty, break from routine, even discontinuity. Komonchak believes that Vatican II was an event in this sense. He also believes that the issue of continuity or discontinuity can be examined from different standpoints. From the standpoint of dogma, Komonchak does not see any discontinuity of Vatican II with tradition. From the doctrinal and sociological standpoints, however, he affirms some discontinuity.

As for the dynamics between the role of the “letter” and the “spirit” of the council in understanding Vatican II, Komonchak’s position is that the spirit of Vatican II needs to be understood in relation to the letter of its final documents. But the documents can often be understood only against the background of their editorial history. Komonchak suggests that one way to understand the “letter” of Vatican II is to compare and contrast the documents which
were prepared for the first session of the council, and which the council was expected to confirm, with the final texts of the council. Such a comparison, he believes, would find many instances of both continuity and discontinuity.

Komonchak understands Vatican II as reconfiguring the landscape of Catholic ecclesiology. First, in its treatment of the nature of the church, Vatican II retrieved the inner, spiritual nature of the church which was neglected in ecclesiology prior to the council. Second, Vatican II broadened the understanding of what it means to belong to the church by acknowledging that many elements of church exist in the non-Catholic churches and ecclesial communities, and that the boundaries of the church reach beyond the Catholic Church. Third, the council recovered the theology of the local church. Fourth, the council rehabilitated the place and the role of the laity in the church. Lastly, the council entered into dialogue with the modern world—something that many Catholics had opposed for over a century.

Komonchak’s perhaps most original contribution to ecclesiology concerns its methodology. He engaged the methodological issues in ecclesiology out of certain reservations about some developments in Catholic ecclesiology after Vatican II. The reservations concerned a shift which took place in Catholic ecclesiology, namely, the recovery of the spiritual, liturgical, and communal dimensions of the church that were neglected in pre-conciliar ecclesiology, which for centuries focused primarily on the church’s institutional elements. Komonchak’s issue with this ecclesiological shift has been that the ecclesiologies stemming from the council have rarely paid sufficient attention to the connection between the church’s transcendent dimension and the concrete communities of the faithful. He came to perceive the question of how one should conceive the church as a single reality, both human and divine, as the central problem for
ecclesiology. As a solution to this problem he proposed to conceive the church as a human community which exists in the world as an effect of God’s self-communication.

Komonchak has provided a vision of ecclesiology as a systematic theological discipline which has theory as its goal. Komonchak’s vision is multi-faceted and consists of several proposals. First, Komonchak has called for ecclesiologists to enter into a conversation with social sciences because in his view a systematic understanding of the church should bear similarities with that of other social realities. This point is grounded in Komonchak’s understanding of the church as both a human and a social reality. Consequently, he has envisioned the work of ecclesiologists to be similar to that of social scientists. It is thus imperative for him that ecclesiologists become familiar with methodologies used in social sciences. Second, Komonchak has proposed that ecclesiologists move beyond the hermeneutical questions with regard to texts and address also those that pertain to social existence. For him, the work of an ecclesiologist cannot be limited to interpreting statements about the church but needs to include the interpretation of the church’s coming-to-be or its self-realization. Lastly, Komonchak has proposed a methodological shift in ecclesiology. Based on his understanding of the church as a community of those who have accepted the Gospel and through whom Christ continues to have an impact on history, Komonchak has proposed envisioning the work of a critical systematic ecclesiology as dealing with an analysis of the consequences of conversion; he speaks about the church in terms of transformed intersubjectivity.

Komonchak’s vision of critical systematic ecclesiology is inseparable from his conception of what the church is. He understands the church as being simultaneously God’s gift and a human task; as having both a divine and a human dimension. It is a community constituted
by a common meaning and value whose ontology is intersubjective. He consciously employs the word “church” in such a way that it refers to a gathering of the faithful. He is critical of predications about the church which do not seem to refer to a human community. For him, the church is a redemptive community, that is, a community through which Christ continues to have redemptive impact on history. Komonchak understands the church as a sign and agent of God’s redemptive purpose.

For Komonchak, the church comes-to-be through a process of self-realization. In fact, the church is that process and it consists of two moments. The objective moment consists of one generation’s communication of the Gospel to the next generation. The reception and appropriation of the Gospel by the second generation Komonchak calls the subjective moment of the church’s genesis. Without this communication and the subsequent reception and appropriation there can be no church. Komonchak views the church as the effect of God’s self-communication in history. This human community—the church—is the subject of its own self-realization. Thus, Komonchak can speak about the church as both God’s gift and our task.

I will conclude this section with three summary points concerning Komonchak’s theology of the local church. The first point concerns the theological significance of locality. Komonchak argues that locality—by which he means the social and cultural differences among the churches—should enter into the very constitution of a local church. For him, locality is not a secondary principle in the church’s coming-to-be, as it is for Henri de Lubac or Giuseppe Colombo; rather, it is an intrinsic dimension of the self-actualization of local churches and for that reason it should enter into the theological definition of the church.
The second point of Komonchak’s theology of the local church concerns the church’s catholicity. Following the lead of the council which expanded the meaning of catholicity, Komonchak’s understanding of catholicity is not limited to the church’s geographical universality, but focuses on diversity and particularity within the church, especially in terms of culture. Komonchak speaks about catholicity as unity-in-diversity or fullness of unity. He draws the conclusion that if catholicity is a foundational notion in reference to the church, and if it means more than geographical universality, then diversity and particularity have a theological significance for the theology of the local church. On this account, locality is not in tension with the church’s catholicity, but rather is its realization.

To counteract excessive claims of socio-cultural particularities of local churches, Komonchak conceives catholicity as redemptive integration. With this notion he conceives the church as an agent of salvation in history; as a sign and instrument of humankind’s union with God and communion with each other. Catholicity, for Komonchak, is a dynamic category; it is a task for the church to be always achieved anew.

The third point of Komonchak’s theology of the local church concerns the relationship between the local church and the universal church. In Komonchak’s ascending approach to ecclesiology, the church universal is conceived as the communion of local churches. The question of priority—that is which comes first, local or universal—does not even arise because Komonchak strictly follows the logic of the mutual interiority between the church universal and the local churches. In fact, thinking about the relationship between the local churches and the universal church in terms of priority is for Komonchak a mistake.
These main points of Komonchak’s theology of the local church are dependent on and to some degree best understood in relation to the foundations that ground his ecclesiological thinking. Komonchak’s thought on the foundations in ecclesiology arose out of what he considers the central problem in ecclesiology, namely how to understand the church as one reality having two dimensions—divine and human. For him, the task of an ecclesiologist is to show how a human community can be the locus of the transcendent.

6.2. FOUNDATIONS IN ECCLESIOLOGY

As has been maintained in this study, the fundamental points of Komonchak’s theology of the local church are grounded in the kind of foundations he envisions for ecclesiology. For that reason I will start the assessment of Komonchak’s contribution to the theology of the local church with an evaluation of his foundations or method in ecclesiology. Three points deserve special consideration: (1) Komonchak’s conception of the church, (2) his conception of the church’s genesis, and (3) his vision of ecclesiology as a systematic theological discipline.

A. The Church

Joseph Komonchak has done a great service to contemporary ecclesiology, first by framing crucial questions and issues that pertain to the theology of the church and then by constructing an understanding of the church that surpasses the level of images and models, and reaches the level of theory. Komonchak took up the challenge of Bernard Lonergan from the epilogue of his *Insight* and provided some formal categories which, compared to other systematic disciplines such as Trinitarian theology, Christology or anthropology, ecclesiology has been lacking. The vision of ecclesiology Komonchak has articulated is comprehensive. It

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attends to multiple issues, all of which are interconnected and together form the building blocks for ecclesiology’s systematic and critical character.

Perhaps the greatest strength of Komonchak’s proposal is his way of thinking about the church that mixes the best of the traditional understanding with the significant insights from the modern period. Komonchak’s conception of the church is balanced, accounting for the church’s divine and human dimensions while avoiding the pitfalls of both theological and sociological reductionism. The understanding of the church Komonchak has constructed could be of significance for communion ecclesiologies to combat the criticism that they idealize the church.3 In this regard communion ecclesiologies could benefit from several elements of Komonchak’s understanding of the church, such as his insistence that the referent of the church is the *congregatio fidelium*, his articulation of the ontology of the church as intersubjective, his understanding of the church as a human and a social reality, and as both God’s gift and our task.

In several ways Komonchak’s approach to the understanding of the church is distinctive among contemporary ecclesiologists.

Komonchak’s definition of the central problem for ecclesiology as articulating an understanding of “how the quite human could be the locus of the quite transcendent,”4 cuts to the center of ecclesiological task, while it maintains the traditional Catholic view that the church is

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one reality, composed of a divine and a human element. Komonchak’s insistence that the exalted theological language about the church in Scripture and tradition be true of concrete communities of believers addresses aptly the challenge ecclesiologists face, if they want to avoid theological reductionism and subsequently, idealized conceptions of the church. Idealization of the church has not been uncommon in the aftermath of Vatican II. As Neil Ormerod observes,

If one were to read many current books on ecclesiology the word [church] would probably evoke a highly idealized vision of church, one which relates not to any particular historical period or even denominational community but to a sort of timeless “universal” church to which we would all like to belong if we could find it, but which sadly does not exist in this earthly realm.

Komonchak’s conception of the church is free of such a tendency. The reasons lie in his understanding of the referent of the word “church,” in his conception of the church’s ontology, and in his solution of the central problem in ecclesiology.

As we have seen in chapter four, Komonchak developed his vision of systematic ecclesiology in critical engagement with the models approach of Avery Dulles, which Komonchak faults for inadequate methodology. It was noted that Komonchak and Dulles diverge on what the task of ecclesiology is. While Dulles believes that the mysterious nature of the church demands that ecclesiologists work with several models and precludes going beyond them, Komonchak is convinced that a single model could incorporate the insights of the various images of the church. This, for Komonchak, is the task of systematic ecclesiology. He has argued that a single definition of the church is possible and has found it in the traditional


6. For the discussion of theological reductionism see chapter four, pp. 116–17.


conception of the church as *congregatio fidelium*, which he also considers the referent of the word “church.” 9

I agree with John Dadosky that Komonchak here provides “a third order definition of the Church, one that reflects what Lonergan calls a critical exigence.” 10 As Dadosky explains, this third order definition of the church relates the first and second order definitions to one another, where the first order definition refers to various images of the church in scripture, tradition, and commonsense language, and the second-order definition organizes the first-order images into various models. 11 The significance of conceiving the church as *congregatio fidelium* is at least two-fold: (1) it reminds us what the first-order images and the second-order models are the images and models of, and (2) it points to the concrete reality of the church.

The language of “models of the church” as worked out by Avery Dulles gained wide acceptance, and his *Models of the Church* is still used by many as a textbook for ecclesiology courses. From my own experience I can confirm that the models approach can open up students’ imagination about the church as well as spur some interesting conversations about their experiences and perceptions of the church. I believe, however, that Komonchak’s critique of Dulles has merit. I think Komonchak argues persuasively that the sixth model, that of the church as a community of disciples, which Dulles introduced in the second edition of his book, is not in fact another model but an actual definition of the church. It is no longer second-order

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language—the language of the models, but third-order language. A community of disciples is what the first-order images and the second-order models refer to. This point can get lost in the discussions of various models. Komonchak’s insistence that *congregatio fidelium* is the referent of the word “church” is therefore well taken, and it can serve as a reminder that what the first-order images (i.e. a sheepfold, God’s building) and the second-order models (i.e. mystical communion, sacrament) refer to is always a community of believers.

Furthermore, the significance of conceiving the church as *congregatio fidelium* is in emphasizing the church’s concrete reality. As we have seen throughout this study, for Komonchak, the church is a concrete reality comprised of concrete men and women forming concrete communities of believers. Komonchak’s insight that whenever one makes a statement about the church, one should be ready to answer the questions, “Of whom is it true? In whom is it true?” should be a standard assumption in ecclesiology. If what is said about the church is not true of anyone, of any community of believers no matter how small, in what sense can it be true about the church? Furthermore, the importance of this insight is in bringing clarity to what the object of ecclesiology is, namely, that it is a concrete community of believers that exists in history. Komonchak’s insistence that when one speaks of the church, one speaks of a *congregatio fidelium* is thus of foundational value for ecclesiology. It is demanded if ecclesiology is to avoid becoming a study of abstractions.

As we have seen in chapter four, Komonchak affirms unambiguously the church’s human and social reality. It is worth recalling how he articulates a strictly theological interpretation of what it means to say that the church is a human reality. He writes:

Whatever Christian faith may say about the divine origin, center, and goal of the Church, it never pretends that the Church does not stand on this side of the distinction between Creator and creature. The Church is not God; it is not Jesus Christ; it is not the Holy Spirit. If the Church is the People of God, the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, it is all of these as a human reality, that is, because certain events occur within the mutually related consciousnesses of a group of human beings.

I share Roger Haight’s judgment that this statement of Komonchak “definitively lays to rest [an] objection that the unequivocal statement that the church is a human reality undermines or compromises the transcendent and divine character of the church.”

Komonchak made a valuable contribution to ecclesiology by clearly articulating the church’s ontology. He makes a cogent distinction between human and social realities and merely physical realities. Consequently, insofar as the church is a human and a social reality, its ontology is the same as that of other human and social realities, namely, it is intersubjective. In other words, it consists of acts of shared intentionality. The church’s objective reality is different from mere physical realities such as Mount Everest or St. Peter’s Square. As in any other human community, the church’s objective reality consists of the conscious operations of its members who are the subject of its self-realization. Komonchak is clear, however, that the church is also different from other human communities in that it exists as a response to God’s self-


14. Komonchak, “Ecclesiology and Social Theory,” 63. As noted in chapter four (see p. 127) Komonchak here adapts the articulation of the church’s human reality by Claude Welch.

communication through Christ and the Spirit. He leaves no doubt that God’s self-communication defines the church as a distinctive reality. Conceiving the church “as a human community which is the effect in the world of God’s self-communication in Christ and the Spirit,”\(^\text{16}\) is Komonchak’s way of articulating that the church is a single reality composed of a divine and a human element, and as such it is his solution to the central problem in ecclesiology.

Komonchak’s articulation of the church’s ontology is valuable for addressing the problem of the reification of the church. Reification happens when the ontology of human and social realities such as the church, university, or government is misrepresented by conceiving them as if they were not human constructs but merely as other things in the world.\(^\text{17}\) Komonchak appropriated the notion of reification from the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman who describe it as a “bestow[al] on [institutions] an ontological status independent of human activity and signification.”\(^\text{18}\) When reification happens, the church floats in midair, so to speak. It is said, unwittingly perhaps, to exist without a connection to a community of believers. Bearing in mind that the church’s ontology is intersubjective, that the church does not exist objectively apart from the acts of collective intentionality of its members, is what is needed to avoid reification.

B. The Genesis of the Church

Komonchak’s conception of the church’s genesis is a clear articulation of how the church actualizes itself in history. It is not a description of the historical origins of the Church, but an account of how the church has been reproducing itself since it originated. His account of the church’s genesis is a synthesis of several components in his conception of the church: the

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intersubjective ontology of the church, the notion of the church as a subject of its own self-realization, the human and social reality of the church, and an understanding of the church as simultaneously God’s gift and our task. In fact, one could say that a conception of the church’s genesis such as the one Komonchak constructed is demanded by and naturally flows from these elements. Komonchak’s *ecclesiogenesis* is also a supreme example of the concreteness of his ecclesiology and is of significance for a theology of the church in at least two respects: (1) it shows how important for ecclesiology the notion of “reception” is, and (2) it grounds Komonchak’s argument that ecclesiology should start with and focus on the local church.

The notion of “reception” has received enormous attention in recent decades. It has been a subject of intense reflection by theologians in connection with the reception of the church teaching, the reception of Vatican II, and/or in general as a foundational theological category. Komonchak’s contribution to this reflection is in arguing persuasively that reception is a foundational category for ecclesiology, namely, that “reception is constitutive of the Church.” Without the continual reception of the Gospel by believers the church would cease to be.

Komonchak’s conception of the church’s genesis through the dynamic interplay of what he refers to as the objective and the subjective moments in the church’s self-realization roughly

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corresponds to what Yves Congar called the formal and material meaning of the word church.\(^{23}\) Komonchak has shown, however, that a metaphysics based on Aristotle is not capable of articulating the church’s genesis adequately. The reason is that matter for Aristotle is pure passivity and is thus not able to express the dynamic agency human subjectivity plays in the church’s genesis. Komonchak is right in pointing out that the church in its formal principles does not exist; it is pure potentiality. And he is correct in asserting that without the reception of the formal principles by concrete men and women there is no church. It is precisely in the event of the reception that the church comes into being. The key point is that unlike matter, which is passive in the reception of form, men and women are quite active in their reception of the Gospel. They are not like a slab of marble which passively receives the form of King David, for instance, becoming his statue. Rather, they receive the Gospel through an active response to it. Moreover, the questions with which they approach it will influence their appropriation of the Gospel. Komonchak is therefore correct in asserting that the reception of the Gospel by the believers is also \textit{formally constitutive of the actually existing church.}\(^{24}\) With his account of the church’s genesis out of the objective and the subjective moment, Komonchak has made a convincing argument that reception \textit{“is so constitutive of the Church that everything else depends on it.”}\(^{25}\)

Moreover, with his account of the church’s genesis Komonchak also firmly grounded his affirmation that ecclesiology should start with and focus on the local church. The logic of this affirmation lies in the role the appropriation or the reception of the Gospel plays in the

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23. See Yves Congar, \textit{True and False Reform of the Church,} 88–90.
24. Komonchak, “Culture and History as the Material Conditions of the Genesis of the Local Church,” 52.
ecclesiogenesis. Since the reception of the Gospel, of the Christian meaning and value, takes place not in the abstract, but is appropriated as a response to the challenges and problems of concrete women and men, who form communities of believers in specific places, “the genesis of the Church is always first and foremost the genesis of a local Church.” Komonchak is right that if one understands the church’s genesis in these terms, the focus of an ecclesiologist needs to shift from the universal church to the local church. The work of an ecclesiologist thus should start from below, so to speak, with a reflection on and an analysis of the local churches which exist in communion with one another. The one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, which we profess in the Creed, does not exist apart from them, apart from their communion.

C. Ecclesiology as a Systematic Theological Discipline

I believe that Komonchak has rendered an indispensable service to contemporary Catholic theology by articulating a vision of ecclesiology as a systematic theological discipline. As Michael Himes argues, systematic ecclesiology originated in the nineteenth century in the context of theologians pondering the connections between the foundational Christian doctrines and their understanding of the church. In the neo-scholastic theological manuals dominant at the time, theology of the church was treated in two different tracks: in fundamental theology or apologetics and in dogmatic theology. The manuals of fundamental theology opened with a demonstration that Christianity was the true religion. In the next step they made a case that as the true religion Christianity required an infallible teaching authority. Thus they showed the need for the church. As Francis Schüssler Fiorenza explains, the demonstration of the institution


of the church, particularly of a Magisterium entrusted with the deposit of faith, was the culmination of fundamental theology. But as Fiorenza further observes, the founding of the church by Jesus was not considered by the manualists a matter of religious belief but a fact which could be historically proven. The internal constitution of the church was then usually treated in the manuals of dogmatic theology.

The ecclesiological manuals prior to Vatican II were systematic in character, but after the council systematic ecclesiology—as Roger Haight put it—“has, practically speaking, disappeared.” Those who did not reject the council realized that it was not possible to continue doing ecclesiology in the style of the manuals. It was not evident, however, what should be done instead. The manuals were replaced in various ways: with historical treatments of the church, with narrative ecclesiologies, and with the model approach to ecclesiology. Although the strength of these approaches was in recovering what was neglected in the manuals, one can agree with Komonchak that these new ecclesiologies needed to be complemented with ecclesiological foundations which could account for ecclesiology’s systematic character. This is what

28. See Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 68.

29. Ibid., 59.


33. For example, Avery Dulles, Models of the Church.
Komonchak has provided, namely, a robust vision capable of raising ecclesiology again to the position of a systematic theological discipline.

Komonchak’s distinctiveness among contemporary ecclesiologists is in providing a theoretical approach to ecclesiology which integrates both the theological and socio-historical data about the church. By insisting that ecclesiology needs to aim at theory, Komonchak has made a point without which a theological discipline can hardly be called critical or systematic. His criticism of the ecclesiologies which do not use precise, critical terms in describing the church has merit. He rightly pointed out that if ecclesiologists use such terms as individual, community, institution, society, structure, meaning, history, or authority without defining them and take their meaning for granted, then such an understanding has not moved beyond the level of common sense and has not yet reached the level of theory. His appropriation of Lonergan’s distinction between common sense and theory is illuminating because it explains why ecclesiology has been lagging behind other theological disciplines, such as Trinitarian theology, Christology, or anthropology. The reason is that in these disciplines theologians employ categories such as “person,” “nature” “procession,” in their technical or theoretical sense, while ecclesiologists regularly use their terms in a common sense meaning. The task of systematic ecclesiology is thus to provide a theoretical account of the church which uses the terms that describe the church not in their common sense meaning but in a precise and critical fashion.

Komonchak’s proposal that ecclesiologists look into social sciences to work out definitions for such terms has been a trademark of his ecclesiological project, and his insistence

34. The distinctiveness of Komonchak’s contribution to ecclesiology has been noted by David Tracy who considers Komonchak an exception among ecclesiologists and theologians in general in integrating both a theological and sociological understanding of the church. See Tracy, Analogical Imagination (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 23.
that the work of an ecclesiologist should resemble the work of a social scientist belongs to his most valuable insights. In fact one could say that through these proposals Komonchak has suggested a new dialogical partner for the work of ecclesiologists.

Philosophy has traditionally been the dialogical partner *par excellence* for theology.\(^{35}\) It has been commonly assumed that one could not do serious theological work without an engagement with some philosophical system. This has been true for such theological disciplines as the theology of God, Christology, theological anthropology, sacramental theology and others, including ecclesiology.\(^{36}\) While not disinviting philosophy from ecclesiological conversations, with his proposals that social sciences become integrated in the work of ecclesiologists, Komonchak has suggested enlarging the circle of conversational partners in ecclesiology with a new member. In fact this is a logical corollary of his conception of the church as a human and social reality, and it naturally flows from such an understanding.

Application of social sciences such as sociology to the study of religion has been accepted in the discipline of religious studies since the pioneering work of Émile Durkheim in the beginning of the twentieth century.\(^{37}\) Sociology of religion, for instance, has become a standard approach by scholars in the departments of religious studies. Its use in the work of theologians, however, is still more of an exception than a rule. Theologians have been somewhat

\(^{35}\) For a historical survey of the influence of philosophy on theology see Steven Shakespeare, “Ecclesiology and Philosophy,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*, 655–73. Although the title of this chapter is “Ecclesiology and Philosophy,” it is really about the relationship between the church/theologians and philosophy.


hesitant in this matter, though not completely mute. It should be noted that this hesitancy is somewhat understandable for at least two reasons: (1) theologians would need to become familiar with another field of discourse, and (2) sociology is a methodologically divided discipline.38 Both of these reasons create a significant challenge for ecclesiologists.

Although some calls to incorporate social sciences into theology in general and ecclesiology in particular have been made prior to that of Komonchak,39 his articulation of the role of social sciences in ecclesiology has been one of the most comprehensive, especially among theologians who write in English.40 This comprehensiveness is directly related to the seriousness with which Komonchak treats the church as a human and social reality. These two dimensions of what the church is are neither peripheral to Komonchak’s ecclesiology, nor subordinate to the theological dimension of the church, but together characterize the church as one reality. Thus, it is understandable that the more he wanted to explore what it means that the church is a human and a social reality, the more he was drawn to social sciences since they would naturally lend adequate categories for exploring those dimensions.


Komonchak’s call for a methodological shift in ecclesiology is another of his distinctive contributions to contemporary ecclesiology. This proposal also naturally flows from Komonchak’s understanding of the church. If the referent of the word “church” is a *congregatio fidelium*, if the church generates itself in each generation by responding with its amen to God’s self-revelation in Christ and the Spirit, and if the church is a human and social reality, then Komonchak is right in proposing that ecclesiology needs to turn to the communities of believers who are the church. They are those *in* whom and *of* whom the theological assertions about the church are true. With the proposal of a methodological shift Komonchak clearly articulated that the object that ecclesiologists study is not primarily the statements about the church in Scripture and tradition, but rather human communities of whom such statements are true. In other words, the subject matter that ecclesiologists investigate is the empirical church.

Komonchak is a master of balance, brilliantly discerning the *via media* among the theological positions. His views on the conciliar hermeneutics, on the ecclesiology of the council, on the relationship of the local and the universal church, and on the relationship of the divine and human elements in the church, exhibit such a balanced approach. Komonchak is also both traditional and innovative. He is traditional in focusing on the visible or the empirical church and in not downplaying the institutional character of the church. In this he is in continuity with pre-Vatican II ecclesiologists. He differs from them, however, in the way he approaches the visible church. While ecclesiologists prior to Vatican II addressed the “visible” juridically or canonically, Komonchak has done the same through the lenses of social sciences. This latter point is where Komonchak has been innovative among contemporary ecclesiologists.
Although Komonchak enjoys respect among his colleagues, even being called “the dean of American ecclesiologists,” his vision of a critical systematic ecclesiology still waits for a robust reception. As Neil Ormerod put it, Komonchak’s call for ecclesiologists to engage social sciences seriously “remains largely unfulfilled.” The subject of foundations or method in ecclesiology has generally been absent from the concern of most of theologians in the field. It has not been addressed by such accomplished ecclesiologists as Francis A. Sullivan, George H. Tavard, Bernard P. Prusak, or Richard R. Gaillardetz, to mention just a few. Richard P. McBrien, for instance, in his recent work has dedicated just four pages to this topic. The notable exceptions in this regard, who also acknowledge Komonchak’s influence on their work, are Neil Ormerod and Roger Haight. Komonchak’s observation that “method in ecclesiology remains a much neglected topic,” is thus still as relevant as it was in 1986 when he made it.

Komonchak himself is aware that he has been a distinctive voice in contemporary ecclesiology. In connection with his approaching retirement he gave a lecture to his colleagues at the School of Theology and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of America on April

41. Robert Doran, Foreword to *Who Are the Church?*, 7.

42. Ormerod, “Ecclesiology and the Social Sciences,” 650.


16, 2009. At the time of questions and answers Fr. Patrick Granfield asked Komonchak whether he knows of any contemporary ecclesiologists who do ecclesiology in the way that he recommends. Komonchak answered, “I was asked this once at a summer course at Fordham and I said ‘no.’ Sometimes it makes me think I have something to contribute. Some other times it makes me think, ‘if these ideas are so bright how come nobody else has them?’” Komonchak then acknowledged that he finds some similarity between himself and Nicholas M. Healy. From Komonchak’s writings one can also conclude that there is some correspondence between his ecclesiological vision and that of Severino Dianich.

6.3. Theology of the Local Church

So far I have assessed Komonchak’s contribution to method or to foundations in ecclesiology. I will now continue by evaluating his contribution to the theology of the local church. I will concentrate on three areas: (1) the significance of locality for the theology of the local church, (2) the meaning of catholicity, and (3) the relationship of the local and universal church.

Joseph Komonchak is both a respected commentator on Vatican II and someone who has offered constructive ways of thinking about those areas of the council’s ecclesiology which were not developed fully or systematically, and/or which were left in the council’s documents in a

47. The voice recording of the lecture and subsequent discussion is in my possession.

48. See Nicholas M. Healy, Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Komonchak refers to the first chapter where Healy argues that ecclesiology needs to be an ecclesiology of the concrete church.

certain tension with one another. One such area is the theology of the local church. Almost everything the council said on the subject of the local church was said implicitly, within its treatment of some other topics. Nevertheless, what the council did say with regard to the local church, whether implicitly or explicitly, could be characterized as a major achievement, especially since with some exceptions in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, the entire second millennium of Roman Catholicism could be characterized as an eclipse of the theology of the local church. Perhaps the clearest point about the local church in the council’s documents is that the local church is wholly the church, though not the whole church, and that it cannot be considered merely an administrative unit or a part of the universal church. Everything else seems to be less clear. For instance, the council documents are not clear on questions such as: (1) what counts as a local church, what should enter into the theological definition of a local/particular church, and consequently what should be considered an individual instance of a local/particular church; (2) what is the import of the enlarged understanding of the church’s catholicity for the notion of the church’s unity; and (3) what is the relationship between the local and the universal church? In his writings, Joseph Komonchak has addressed these three issues and provided both his interpretation of the conciliar texts and insights that go beyond the texts. He constructed new interpretations that are clarifying and enriching.

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51. “Une Église locale est entièrement Église, mais elle n’est pas toute l’Église.” This is the expression of J. J. Von Allmen which many ecclesiologists have been quoting with approval. “L’Église locale parmi les autres Églises locales,” *Irénikon* 43 (1970): 512–37, at 512.
A. The Significance of Locality

One of the points not addressed clearly in the documents of Vatican II is what constitutes a local church, and how it should be defined. This lack of clarity can be seen as a result of several characteristics that mark the documents. First, the council’s ecclesiology is for the most part presented within the universalistic framework. Only a few texts focus on the local church. Second, with the exception of chapter three in the Decree Ad gentes titled “Particular Churches,” the local church is never treated as a specific topic, but arises only implicitly in the council’s treatment of other matters such as the ministry of the bishop, episcopal collegiality, and the connection of the Eucharist and the church. Third, the documents of Vatican II are not consistent in their use of the adjectives “local” or “particular” when applied to the church. Thus the questions of what counts as a local church, and how it should be defined remained open and were left to be addressed by theologians after the close of the council. Joseph Komonchak was one of those who tackled the issue. As we have seen in chapter five, for him the central issue in the theology of the local church is determining what elements should enter into the theological definition of a local church. In his view, this issue is ultimately about what ecclesiological significance should be assigned to the elements of locality, by which he means political, social, and cultural particularity among the churches.

Komonchak’s most distinctive contribution to the theology of the local church has been to argue that locality should enter into the theological definition of a local church. His position is in contrast to that of Henri de Lubac and others for whom only spiritual and hierarchical

52. Cf. chapter 2, pp. 28–30.
53. Cf. chapter 5, pp. 163.
54. See Komonchak, “The Local Church,” 322–23.
considerations should enter into the theological definition of a local church, while socio-cultural factors do not, though they are useful *ad bonum ecclesiae.* Komonchak considers de Lubac’s position inadequate because it does not fit his conception of the church’s genesis. For Komonchak the church comes-to-be at the intersection of God’s self-communication mediated by one generation’s communication of the Gospel and its reception by another generation. As has been stressed in this study, the reception of the Gospel is for Komonchak constitutive of the ecclesiogenesis, and the factors of locality are not theologically insignificant in that genesis as Komonchak understands it. Although they do not make the church into *church,* they do make the church into a *local* church. Without those local factors, Komonchak argues, “there is in fact nothing local about the local Church, nothing particular about the particular Church.”

Given Komonchak’s conception of the church’s genesis, his point that locality should enter into the theological definition of a local church is well taken. What one should also recognize here is that Komonchak makes a connection between anthropology and ecclesiology, a connection rather rare for ecclesiologists to make. Locality, for Komonchak, is not just a geographical category. It is a theological category because it is anthropologically grounded insofar as locality refers to the people who respond to the gospel. It refers to the concreteness with regard to their socio-political and cultural milieu, and also to their being subject to sin and open to God’s offer of salvation.

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55. For the sake of precision it should be noted that de Lubac distinguishes terminologically between a local and a particular church, while Komonchak does not. In this context de Lubac would use the term particular church. He understands local churches as groupings of particular churches.


If one accepts Komonchak’s position that locality is not just accidental to a local church but together with the church’s generative principles it enters into its theological definition, and if one conceives the universal church as a communion of local churches, the following questions may arise: Do we still need the adjective “local” when referring to the church? Is there a church that is not a local church? Is it necessary to distinguish between a local church and a local church? All that exists concretely are local churches. The universal church is a communion among them and has no existence apart from them. It seems that these are valid questions if one takes Komonchak’s insistence on the concreteness of the church seriously.

Komonchak pushes his reflections on locality and its role in the theology of the local church to their limits. One cannot assign more significance to locality than to argue that it should enter into the theological definition of the local church. Komonchak is effectively saying that different localities will generate different local churches, where differences among the churches will not be accidental to them, but will enter into their constitution. This view is the complete opposite of the universalistic ecclesiology and the uniformity among the churches it promotes. An ecclesiology like that of Komonchak’s, which starts with the local church and which assigns locality a theologically constitutive place in the church’s genesis, reconfigures both the notion of the whole or universal church and of the church’s unity.

Perhaps the best analogy for Komonchak’s view of locality and its significance for ecclesiology is the human species itself. On the one hand there are certain characteristics that apply to all of us such as that we all share a human DNA and a basic human appearance, we all must have certain physical organs to be alive (i.e., heart, brain, lungs), unless severely

handicapped, we are self-conscious creatures with the capacity to think, choose, and relate to others. These are analogical to the generative principles of the church in the sense that they are found in all of us. Each one of us, however, possesses certain uniqueness. This uniqueness pertains both to our physicality and to our interiority (i.e., our personality, character and other traits of our individuality that are particularly ours). They are not accidental to who we are, but constitute us. What pertains to human uniqueness is analogical to what Komonchak means by locality. My uniqueness makes me into a person different from my sister or any other human being, though we are all human beings. Locality makes one church different from another church, though they are both churches. This should not be surprising. If churches are made of people, what applies to people should also apply to the churches.

Komonchak’s understanding of locality and its significance for the theology of the local church is of importance for the notion of inculturation. Inculturation could be described as

the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about “a new creation.”

As such, inculturation concerns not only the church’s missionary activity to non-Christians who have not yet received the gospel, but because of the nature of the church’s genesis, its coming-to-be in every generation, as elucidated by Komonchak, it concerns every local church. As cultures develop and change those who want to transmit the Gospel to the next generation must


take into account that the reception of the Gospel is a dynamic process, not a simple handing on of ideas, moral codes, and rituals. The interaction between the Gospel and culture is the interaction between one generation’s incarnation of Christian life and message, which took place in a particular cultural context, and another generation’s locality, that is, its socio-political and cultural milieu. Since the questions the new generation is asking may be in some respects different from those of the previous generation, the church that will be generated may be in some respects a different church from the one which announced the Gospel. The same applies to announcing the Gospel to new cultures. The interaction between the Gospel and these cultures will produce a church that is different from the one that announced the Gospel. I believe that Komonchak’s view of the church’s genesis and his understanding of locality are illuminating for the process of inculturation. They in fact describe the same reality.

B. Catholicity and the Church’s Unity

Komonchak synthesized and further developed the council’s teaching on the catholicity of the church. He correctly recognized that Vatican II enlarged the meaning of catholicity. In the conciliar texts catholicity does not only refer to the church’s geographical extension throughout the world, but also to the notion of the fullness-in-unity. In this qualitative sense, diversity and particularity are not in opposition to the church’s unity; rather, they build it up. Komonchak’s point that diversity belongs to the essential elements of the catholic church is also well taken. If catholicity is one of the marks of the church professed in the Creed, and if it incorporates diversity, then diversity must have the same status as locality, namely, it must belong to the theological definition of a local church.
In his treatment of catholicity, Komonchak’s balanced approach to issues and questions gets displayed. He realizes that the positive value he ascribes to socio-cultural particularities may lead to local churches closing in on themselves and to various kinds of exclusivism. His proposal for deemphasizing the particularities among the local churches and conceiving catholicity as a redemptive integration appears to be necessary to maintain the via media between the extremes of uniformity stemming from a universalistic ecclesiology that does not see value in socio-cultural particularity, and radical fragmentation and exclusivism which is a possibility in an ecclesiology that focuses on local churches. Although Komonchak’s proposal of conceiving catholicity as redemptive integration and the church as a redemptive community is not groundbreaking, it has great relevance for our times. In fact, I think it has a prophetic value, for it is challenging the church to make a difference in the world.

It is not new to say that for many people of today, especially for the young, the church has become an obstacle in their lives of faith. When I say “church,” I mean all the faithful. Those who say “yes” to God and Jesus but “no” to church are not able to perceive the church as a sign and instrument of all the good things that one associates with belief in God and the life that should result from it. This is not the space to enter into a discussion of unbelief, and certainly, the problem also lies with those who do not believe. In addition, it also needs to be affirmed that many acts of great witness to the Gospel happen every day in all parts of the world. Yet I think that religious people themselves, in this case the church, Catholics, often do not “sell” the Gospel well. For instance, the polarization and divisiveness that exists among us Catholics at this point in history is a “turn off” to many. Komonchak’s conception of the church as a redemptive community and his understanding of catholicity as redemptive integration are not just theoretical
constructs for discussion; they are a challenge to be dealt with. They are another way of articulating the notion of the church as sacrament. If they became more of a reality than they are at present, they would be the kind of witness the critics of the church expect from those who say that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5:19).

C. The Relationship between the Local and the Universal Church

Komonchak has offered a balanced interpretation of the relationship between the local and universal church. His strength is in keeping together both sides of the dialectic with which the council expressed the relationship, namely, that particular churches are formed in the image of the universal church while the universal church exists in and out of them. As we have seen in chapter five, Komonchak understands the phrase “the image of the universal church” as pertaining to the generative principles of the church. Since these principles generate all local churches, they also generate the universal church which exists in and out of them.

Komonchak’s criticism of the CDF’s letter Communionis notio is well taken. He is correct in saying that the assertion of historical and ontological priority of universal church over the local church dissolves the balance of Lumen gentium 23. The best way to understand Lumen gentium 23 is by affirming the mutuality and simultaneity of the local and the universal church. An assertion of priority on either side is not consistent with what Vatican II said, even if the whole balance rests on just one word, the preposition ex. According to Lumen gentium 23, two things need to be affirmed: (1) that particular churches are formed in the image of the universal church, and (2) that the universal church exists in and out of (ex) them. Komonchak is correct.


that the Congregation’s letter is consistent only with the first part of what *Lumen gentium* says but not with the second. The first affirmation rules out the priority of the local church and the second rules out the priority of the universal church. The whole question of priority, as Komonchak says, should not in fact arise.

D. Komonchak vis-à-vis *Lumen gentium*, Boff, Ratzinger, and Tillard

In chapter two I said that as part of the evaluation of Komonchak’s theology of the local church, his work will be assessed vis-à-vis *Lumen gentium* and three theologians whose work represents the reception and the advancement of the Vatican II’s theology of the local church. I have already indicated that in my opinion Komonchak’s theology of the local church is consistent with *Lumen gentium* and in three areas—the significance of locality, catholicity and the church’s unity, and the relationship between the local and the universal church—represents its further advancement.

Komonchak’s theology of the local church resembles most closely the work of Jean Marie Tillard, though Komonchak’s contribution is not nearly as comprehensive in terms of which issues are addressed. On all three points, which I identified as Komonchak’s contribution to the theology of the local church (locality, catholicity, the relationship of local and universal church) there is a significant agreement between Komonchak and Tillard. Like Komonchak, Tillard places significant value on locality. For both of them locality is not just a geographical category, but one which contains an anthropological dimension touching upon the totality of the human condition. Tillard views locality as the setting in which the church of God is incarnated. For him, locality is the geographic, cultural, historical, and sociological human space in which the Gospel takes root. It does not seem, however, that Tillard claims that locality is theologically
constitutive of a local church. Komonchak’s reflections on locality are connected with his foundations in ecclesiology, particularly with his account of the church’s genesis.

Methodological issues in ecclesiology were not, however, of significant interest to Tillard, for which he received some criticism.63

Komonchak and Tillard also share an understanding of catholicity. Tillard provided a massive reflection on catholicity in his L’Église locale where he investigated its biblical and patristic roots, provided a survey of its understanding in the subsequent tradition, and offered his views for today in light of Vatican II. Both Tillard and Komonchak place considerable weight on the qualitative understanding of catholicity in terms of wholeness of God’s gifts to the church. They affirm that the church has been endowed with this kind of catholicity from its origins at Pentecost. They consider the church of Pentecost as both local and universal/catholic. They argue for the mutual inherence of the local and universal church. Furthermore, they share the understanding of catholicity as unity-in-diversity and argue that diversity and locality are not opposed to catholicity but rather to uniformity. They also share the understanding of catholicity as a gift and a task. Lastly, they both warn against over-emphasizing ethnic and cultural differences among the local churches and caution against local churches closing in on themselves.

An important element of Tillard’s theology of catholicity is the notion of recognition. For Tillard, recognition serves catholicity because it ensures genuine unity-in-diversity.64 In its 1992 letter Communionis notio the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith criticized the view

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64. See chapter 2, pp. 61–62.
that “the universal church is the result of a reciprocal recognition on the part of the particular churches.”\(^{65}\) Although the Congregation did not mention any theologian by name, it is possible that it had the work of Tillard in mind. It seems that Komonchak would defend Tillard on this issue. As I have shown in chapter five,\(^{66}\) Komonchak defends the theologians who have spoken about reciprocal recognition. He explains that the theologians whose work he is acquainted with—Tillard is one of them since he makes references to his work—do not understand recognition as “a second moment” in the realization of the universal church out of the local churches, where the first moment would be the constitution of autonomous local churches. Instead, recognition needs to be understood within the framework of reciprocity and mutual inherence of the local and the universal church.

While Komonchak is closer to Tillard than to Boff, there are also some similarities between Komonchak’s and Boff’s theologies of the local church. First, they both construct ecclesiologies “from below,” Boff starting with the base ecclesial communities and Komonchak with the local church. Second, they are interested in a broader understanding of the local church than one which is limited to a diocese. This is certainly the core of Boff’s contribution to the theology of the local church; he argues that base ecclesial communities should be considered churches, theologically speaking. Although Komonchak never treats the topic of base ecclesial communities since it is not part of his ecclesial context; nevertheless based on his understanding of *Lumen gentium* 26, which he takes as applying to infra-diocesan communities, he seems to be open to designating a parish as a local church. Third, Komonchak and Boff, as well as Tillard

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\(^{65}\) *CN* 8.

\(^{66}\) See chapter 5, pp. 179–80.
and Ratzinger, see a connection between ecclesiology and soteriology. Komonchak speaks about the church as a redemptive community and understands catholicity as a redemptive integration. Boff speaks about the soteriological mission of the church in terms of mediating the presence of God’s Kingdom in history through its life and actions. Tillard and Ratzinger make strong connections between communion and salvation.

The main difference between Komonchak and Boff is with regard to the relationship of the local and the universal church. It is somewhat paradoxical that Boff develops his ecclesiology “from below” but asserts the priority of the universal church over the local church. The reason lies in his understanding of the universal church which he identifies with the universality of God’s salvific offer. The universal church is the church from above. It enjoys a primacy because it exists in all the local churches. Its primacy is rooted in the primacy of faith which is the foundation of any local church. Although Komonchak has not been critical of Boff in this regard, I believe that what he has said about *Communionis notio* applies here as well, namely, that Boff’s understanding of the relationship between the local and the universal church is not consistent with *Lumen gentium* 23 because it does not view the universal church as existing “in and out of” the local churches. Furthermore, it seems that Komonchak would see Boff’s universal church, which exists analogously to God’s salvific offer of grace, as an abstraction.

Of the three authors considered as representing different trajectories of the theology of the local church after the council, Komonchak shares least in common with Joseph Ratzinger. While Ratzinger’s theology of the local church is thoroughly eucharistic, a sustained reflection on the Eucharist and the church is absent from Komonchak’s work. Komonchak is never critical
of eucharistic ecclesiology nor does he deny the connection between the Eucharist and the church. He always lists Eucharist as one of the generative principles of the church but does not say more. One may find this silence surprising since recovering the connection between the Eucharist and the church played a significant role in rediscovering the local church prior to Vatican II.

The lack of a sustained reflection on the Eucharist and the church also distinguishes Komonchak from Tillard, for whom, as in the case of Ratzinger, the connection between the Eucharist and the church is a key element in his theology of the local church. Both Ratzinger and Tillard consider the Eucharist the prime realization of the church. For neither of them it is possible to define the church in formal terms without a reference to eucharistic communities. The last paragraph in Komonchak’s *Foundations in Ecclesiology* might shed some light on the issue.

I do not pretend that these essays represent a complete ecclesiology. Several areas need much further development: the constitutive role of liturgy and sacrament, the foundations and role of ministry, and, perhaps above all, the incidence upon the Church itself of the dialectic of progress, decline, and recovery, that is, the question of the sinfulness of the Church. I remain convinced, however, that all these themes can be developed coherently from the foundations I have tried to lay here. And perhaps time and energy will permit them to be taken up in the future. 

Perhaps Komonchak’s reference to constitutive role of liturgy and sacrament as an area of his ecclesiology that needs much further development could be seen as an indication of his awareness that the connection between the Eucharist and the church is a needed element in his ecclesiology, though not yet worked out.

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Komonchak and Ratzinger also differ in the significance they assign to locality. For Ratzinger, locality is not a substantial category in his theology of the local church. Although he acknowledges that the church is a human community, he is quick to point out that people cannot make the church but only receive it. Ratzinger conceives the human element in this reception as being rather passive. One has the impression that he would not be comfortable affirming the human and social reality of the church to the degree that Komonchak has done. Locality, the socio-political and cultural influences on the view of an individual, is considered suspect, for leading to an impoverished view of the church, reducing it merely to a sociological reality.

Lastly, Komonchak and Ratzinger differ in their position on the relationship between the local and universal church. Since Ratzinger’s position is virtually identical to that of the CDF, what I said above about Komonchak and the CDF applies here as well. I believe that the key to Ratzinger’s insistence on the priority of the universal church over the local church lies in this statement:

> The office of Peter’s successor is a special instance of the office of bishop and is directed in a particular way toward responsibility for the unity of the whole Church. Yet this office of Peter and its responsibility could not exist if the universal Church had not existed before it. Otherwise it would be grasping at emptiness and would represent an absurd claim.\(^{68}\)

This statement of Ratzinger from 2000 is similar to what the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, whose prefect he was, asserted in 1988 in its working paper on episcopal conferences.

> Petrine primacy, understood as *plentudo potestatis*, has no theological sense and coherence unless within the primacy of the one and universal church over particular and local churches.\(^{69}\)

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I consider Komonchak’s observation that “[these] two statements come close to implying that if the priority of the universal church were denied, the pope would have nothing to do”\textsuperscript{70} to be insightful. Based on these statements it seems to me that the question of the relationship of the local and the universal church concerns ultimately the nature and exercise of the Petrine ministry. It appears that the way this ministry has been exercised in the second millennium fits better the framework of the universalistic ecclesiology in which the universal church has primacy over the local churches. It would need to be rethought if the universal church did not have such primacy.

E. Strengths and Weaknesses

So far my appraisal of Joseph Komonchak’s ecclesiological vision has praised his work for its strengths. I have spoken about the following elements of his ecclesiology: (1) Komonchak has constructed an understanding of the church that transcends the level of images and models and reaches the level of theory; (2) his conception of the church is balanced, accounting for the church’s divine and human element; (3) he has articulated clearly the notion of the church’s ontology and the church’s genesis, setting up his insistence that ecclesiology should start with and focus on the local church; (4) he has provided a vision of ecclesiology as a critical systematic discipline; (5) he has incorporated the insights from social sciences without falling to sociological reductionism; (6) Komonchak’s most distinct contribution to the theology of the local church has been to argue that locality—the socio-political and cultural factors—should enter into the theological definition of the local church; (7) he has provided a balanced approach

\textsuperscript{70} Komonchak, “What Ecclesiology for the Petrine Ministry?” 149.
to the understanding of the church’s catholicity; and (8) he has offered a balanced interpretation of the relationship of the local and the universal church.

In terms of the weaknesses I have identified two areas which may require further reflection.\(^{71}\)

First, in my view Komonchak is not always consistent in his understanding of the church’s ontology. This happens when he says that the (universal) church is realized \textit{in} the local church(es). Let me illustrate with several examples.

\ldots The focus will be on the genesis of the Church in the local Churches.\(^{72}\)

\ldots That is how particular, how concrete, the genesis of the Church is, the genesis of the universal Church in and out of the genesis of a local Church.\(^{73}\)

\ldots The universal Church is not something accessory to the local Church; it is precisely what is being realized in a local Church. The universal Church, in turn, is not something which existed or now exists prior to or independent of the local Churches, as if the latter were administrative sub-divisions of the former, on the analogy, say, of a multi-national corporation which from a central office establishes branch offices in major cities and retail shops in smaller localities. There is nothing which constitutes the universal Church which is not realized in the local Churches.\(^{74}\)

\ldots This self-actualization of the Church in assemblies of believers is always and everywhere a concrete hermeneutical and historical event \ldots \(^{75}\)

\ldots It is indeed the one church of Christ that is present in all of the individual churches \ldots \(^{76}\)

\(^{71}\) I do not consider my observation that Komonchak lacks a reflection on the Eucharist and the church to be a weakness of his ecclesiology since he never denies such a connection.

\(^{72}\) Komonchak, “Toward a Theology of the Local Church,” 21.

\(^{73}\) Komonchak, “The Local Church,” 328.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., 326.

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 327.

\(^{76}\) Komonchak, “The Theology of the Local Church,” 46.
As I have shown in chapter four, Komonchak argues that the ontology of the church is intersubjective, that is, it refers to human intersubjectivity and consists of acts of shared meaning and value. If the ontology of the church is intersubjective, it must be intersubjective with regard to both local and universal church insofar as they are “churches,” even if they are not the same realities. I think that the preposition in obscures the intersubjective ontology of the church. The understanding of the universal church which is realized in the local churches still suggests that in some way the universal church exists apart from the local churches and is anterior to them.\textsuperscript{77} If not as a Platonic idea, the universal church exists as something abstracted from the particular churches, namely, that which exists in all of them. The preposition in thus fits Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics, but not the metaphysics Komonchak himself advocates.

I believe that this problem is generated by the statement in \textit{Lumen gentium} 23 which asserts that particular churches are constituted after the model of the universal church and that the universal church exists in them and is formed out of them. This simple juxtaposition of seemingly contradictory assertions has been the cause of debates with regard to which one has priority, whether the local or the universal church. We have seen that Komonchak does not privilege one or the other assertion, but explains them in such a way that they are both affirmed, even though the tension remains.\textsuperscript{78} It seems clear that in is demanded by the conciliar text.

I think that the best way to express the mutual relationship between the universal church and the local churches while affirming the intersubjective ontology of the church is to use the preposition as instead of in. The universal church exists as a communion of local churches, it is

\textsuperscript{77} Note that in my third example Komonchak explicitly rejects this view.

\textsuperscript{78} See chapter 5, pp. 154–56. Note that Komonchak explicitly rejects the Platonic understanding in the sense that the local churches are reproductions of some ideal church.
the communion existing among the local churches, it is the church of churches. If, as Komonchak argues, the referent of the word “church” is *congregatio fidelium*, if “church” always refers to people, then how can people (the universal church) be realized *in* people (the local churches)? It seems clear that when Komonchak says that the universal church is realized *in* the local churches, by the universal church he does not mean people but the generative principles of the church. These principles, however, are not the church, if one says that the ontology of the church is intersubjective. I would change the statements from above in this way.

- . . . The focus will be on the genesis of the Church *as* the local Churches.
- . . . That is how particular, how concrete, the genesis of the Church is, the genesis of the universal Church *as* the genesis of a local Church.
- . . . The universal Church is not something accessory to the local Church; it is precisely what is being realized *as* a local Church. The universal Church, in turn, is not something which existed or now exists prior to or independent of the local Churches, as if the latter were administrative sub-divisions of the former, on the analogy, say, of a multi-national corporation which from a central office establishes branch offices in major cities and retail shops in smaller localities. There is nothing which constitutes the universal Church which is not realized *as* the local Churches.
- . . . This self-actualization of the Church *as* assemblies of believers is always and everywhere a concrete hermeneutical and historical event . . .
- . . . It is indeed the one church of Christ that is present *as* all of the individual churches . . .

What I am suggesting is not entirely absent in Komonchak’s writings. The title of his very first article on the local church is “The Church Universal as the Communion of Local Churches.” He also makes statements saying that what is realized in the local churches is not the universal church but the generative principles of the church. For instance:

> More important than the Council’s vocabulary are its major theological concerns in its statements about the local churches. These seem to me to be twofold: first, the assertion

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79. “When ecclesiology attends to the human acts by which its members realize the Church, its focus necessarily shifts to the local church.” Komonchak, “Ministry and the Local Church,” 69.
that the distinctive and constitutive principles of the Church’s existence are realized in the local church . . .

. . . in its distinctive and constitutive principles, the Church is realized in local Churches.

I will discuss two themes that emerged from the ecclesiology of Vatican II, the generative and constitutive principles of the church as realized in the many churches and . . .

[Vatican II revalidated the local church] by its renewed attention to the distinctive spiritual principles of the church as realized in local communities . . .

All these passages from Komonchak show that it is not the universal church that is realized in the local churches, but rather the generative principles of the church. This leads me to make another critical observation.

Second, Komonchak’s theology of the local church would be strengthened if there were more clarity with regard to what the term “universal church” designates. This applies not only to Komonchak, but also to other ecclesiologists as well as the magisterial writings. Sometimes the term is employed in the binary the “universal” and the “particular,” or in the binary the “one” and the “many.”

“Universal” here refers to what is abstracted from the particulars. Other times, the term “universal” seems to mean “whole” as in the distinction between the “whole” and its “parts.” “Universal” in the sense of “whole” can also refer to the sum total of believers. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that Latin knows both universus (whole) and

83. Ibid., 37.
universalis (universal). Still other times theologians speak of “the one church” or “the catholic church,” “the church of Christ,” “the church of God,” or just “the church.” The problem is that these terms imply different conceptions of the relationship between the local and the universal church.

If “universal” refers to what is abstracted from the particulars, the universal church is an abstraction. If it refers to the “whole church” as the sum total of its parts, then only the universal/whole church is fully church. Local churches lack the full ecclesial reality. If the universal church is understood as the communion of local churches, we have a relationship of mutuality and interiority between the local and the universal church.

Komonchak shows awareness of these issues when he writes:

There remains the question of terminology. Everyone knows the debate, which is more than semantic, over whether to speak of the “local” Church or the “particular” Church. Much less attention has been given to how the one Church should be referred to. Should it be ecclesia universalis or ecclesia universa? . . .

The question would appear not to be trivial. In some languages at least, and in some contexts to ask about the relationship between the whole Church (universa Ecclesia) and the particular or local Churches is very different from asking about the relationship between the universal Church (Ecclesia universalis) and the local or particular Churches. With the first way of posing the question one more easily avoids the danger of hypostasizing the universal Church, of forgetting that the distinction is, as scholastics say, an inadequate one, because the one Church, the whole Church, the Church as a whole, does not exist apart from the many Churches. 85

One wishes that Komonchak had expanded these observations further.

This terminological problem is present in Lumen gentium 23 in the statement about the relationship of the local and the universal church. The document says, “The individual bishops are the visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular Churches, which are constituted after the model of the universal Church; it is in these and formed out of them that the

one and unique Catholic Church exists.” If the council wanted to affirm the mutuality between the particular churches and the universal church, why is there a terminological change from the “universal church” in the first assertion to the “one and unique Catholic Church” in the second assertion? Are these the same realities? It seems that “universal” in the expression “the model of the universal church” carries the philosophical meaning of essence. But this essence is an abstraction. It refers to what is found in all the particular churches, namely, what this study has been calling the generative principles of the church. This universal church that is the model for the particular churches is not made up of believers. It exists only in one’s mind. But the “one and Catholic Church,” which exists in and out of the particular churches is not an abstraction. It is made of believers. Thus, the “universal church” and “one and Catholic Church” appear to refer to distinct realities. The two assertions in Lumen gentium 23 are simply juxtaposed and can be understood as implying either the priority of the universal or of the local church. However, the “universal church” in the first assertion and “the one and Catholic Church” in the second assertion do not seem to be the same realities. I believe that these observations illustrate the need for ecclesiologists to sort through the terminological choices with regard to the “universal church.”

6.4. CONCLUSION

This study has presented, analyzed, and evaluated the contribution of Joseph A. Komonchak to the theology of the local church. After being neglected for rather a long time, the local church was one of the themes which were retrieved at Vatican II, and it aroused enormous interest in the years following the council. It was at the basis of the implementation of the liturgical renewal mandated by Vatican II. It led to the emergence of the so-called local
theologies and to a greater appreciation of various cultures in which local churches exist. It was also a source of hope that the church would become less centralized and more collegial. In many ways the theology of the local church could be seen as the *articulus stantis et cadentis* of Vatican II’s ecclesiology.

After a millennium of universalistic ecclesiology which focused not on the local churches but on the universal church, the council was only able to provide some basic principles of a theology of the local church. A systematic and comprehensive articulation of the theology of the local church was left to theologians after the council’s close. Here is where the work of Komonchak comes in. For several decades he has been one of the most significant voices in the United States in the field of ecclesiology. On a number of issues he has made a distinct contribution to the field. The theology of the local church is one of them.

This study identified three areas of Komonchak’s contribution to the theology of the local church and demonstrated that his theology of the local church is grounded in the kind of foundations he envisions for ecclesiology. The foundations concern (1) his vision of ecclesiology as a critical systematic discipline, (2) his understanding of the church, and (3) his view of the church’s genesis. I have praised Komonchak for rendering an indispensable service to contemporary ecclesiology for several reasons. His vision of ecclesiology as a critical systematic discipline raises ecclesiology beyond the level of images and models to the level of a theoretical understanding. It also shows how ecclesiologists can engage social theory without falling into sociological reductionism. Komonchak’s understanding of the church is complex and multifaceted, capable of accounting for the church’s human and divine dimensions. His conception of the church’s genesis grounds his insistence that ecclesiology should start with and
focus on the local church. Komonchak’s view of the church’s genesis consists of two moments. The objective moment refers to one generation’s communication of the Gospel to the next generation. Komonchak calls the reception and appropriation of the Gospel by that generation the subjective moment of the church’s genesis. Without this communication and the subsequent reception and appropriation there can be no church. Since the reception of the Gospel always takes place in and is mediated by the existential and historical questions of a particular group of people, the genesis of the church is always the genesis of a local church.

The three areas of Komonchak’s contribution to the theology of the local church concern (1) the significance of locality, (2) the understanding of catholicity and the church’s unity, and (3) the relationship of the local and the universal church. I have shown that the concreteness with which he understands the church’s genesis led Komonchak to argue that locality, by which he means socio-political and cultural factors, is not accidental to a local church but should enter into its theological definition. This means that different localities will generate different churches. In my view this is the most distinct contribution of Komonchak to the theology of the local church. It explains why diversity is constitutive of the church. It also goes hand-in-hand with the council’s enlarged understanding of catholicity as fullness-in-unity or unity-in-diversity since diversity and local particularity are not in these views threats to the church’s catholicity and unity.

I have identified two areas of Komonchak’s theology of the local church which seem to require further development. I have argued that Komonchak has not always been consistent in his understanding of the church’s ontology. This happens when he says that the universal church is realized in the local churches. Although this language is consistent with the council, it is not
consistent with Komonchak’s understanding of the intersubjective ontology of the church. I suggested that it should be said that the universal church is realized as local churches. I have also suggested that Komonchak’s theology of the local church would be improved by a more consistent definition of the term “universal church.”

This study has been personally stimulating and fulfilling. I would not hesitate to rank Joseph A. Komonchak among the leading Catholic ecclesiologists in the post-Vatican II period. Many of his insights, especially those in the area of method in ecclesiology, constitute a distinctive contribution to the field and still await a broader engagement from other ecclesiologists. Komonchak’s genius lies in incorporating some of the best insights on the church from the tradition with contemporary developments on human communities from social sciences. Komonchak has pointed out the way ecclesiology should go, if it does not want to be the study of abstractions. He has tirelessly made the point that when one thinks about the church, one should not lose sight that it is always a human community responding to the Gospel.
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¹ This is a slightly altered version of “Le valutazioni sulla Gaudium et Spes: Chenu, Dossetti, Ratzinger.”


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2. Multiple entries by one author are listed in a chronological order.

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