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Vatican II themes: The church as an eschatological community

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Essays in Theology

A sixth, and final, ecclesiological principle articulated by the Second Vatican Council is embodied in its teaching that the church is not an end in itself, but that it exists always and only for the sake of the Reign, or Kingdom, of God. In other words, the Church is an *eschatological* community.

The church is "already" and "not yet" within the Reign of God. Insofar as it is "already" within God's Reign, it is itself a mystery, or sacrament, and an object of faith ("I believe in the Church.?).

Insofar as it is "not yet" within the Reign of God, it is a sinful church on pilgrimage through history, holy but always in need of penance, renewal, and reform.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*) expressed it succinctly: "The Church has but one sole purpose—that the Kingdom of God may come and the salvation of the human race may be accomplished" (n. 45).

As I pointed out in my book, *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism*, everything that the church is and does is always subordinate to and in service of the coming Reign, or Kingdom, of God (p. 180).

Over the past few weeks, Fr. McBrien's columns have explored the major ecclesiological themes or principles proclaimed at the Second Vatican Council.

Vatican II themes: **The church as mystery, or sacrament**

Vatican II themes: **The people of God**

Vatican II themes: **The church as servant**

Vatican II themes: **The church as communion**

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Vatican II themes: **The church as an eschatological community**

This conciliar teaching was in sharp contrast to the widespread preconconciliar assumption that the church is the Kingdom of God on earth. Thus, the parables of the Kingdom were regularly interpreted by preachers, catechists, and even some theologians as parables of the church.

The tendency to equate the church with the Kingdom of God was denounced as a form of 'triumphalism' in a famous intervention at Vatican II by the late Bishop Emile Jozef De Smedt of Bruges, Belgium.

Article 5 was added to the Dogmatic Constitution on the church (*Lumen gentium*) precisely to counteract this residual habit of equating the church with the Kingdom of God.

Just as Jesus came to announce, personify, and bring about the Kingdom of God, so too the church exists to proclaim, witness to, and help establish the Kingdom on earth and to facilitate its fulfillment at the end of history.

But unlike Jesus, the church cannot claim to be itself the Kingdom of God. It is at most 'the seed and the beginning of that Kingdom. While it slowly grows to maturity, the Church longs for the completed Kingdom and, with all its strength, hopes and desires to be united in glory with its king' (n. 5).

The whole of chapter 7 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church is devoted to the eschatological nature of the church under the title, 'The Pilgrim Church.'

The church is 'the universal sacrament of salvation,' existing in 'the final age of the world,' whose renewal is 'irrevocably under way.' The church is already enlivened by the Holy Spirit and in communion with the Lord, but it still belongs to the present age and 'carries the mark of this world which will pass' (n. 48).

On the other hand, some of the church's members have already died and are enjoying the fullness of eternal glory in heaven. These constitute the church triumphant in the communion of saints.

They become for the church on earth (known in the post-Reformation tradition as the church militant) exemplars and models of Christian discipleship and sanctity and as such are signs of the Kingdom and a 'cloud of witnesses' to it (n. 50).

The pastoral implications of understanding the church as an eschatological community include the readiness of church members to criticize their official leaders publicly in their exposure of church faults such as the sexual-abuse scandal in the priesthood, and in their various efforts to bring about structural

change in the church regarding, for example, the way in which bishops are selected and in the standards of eligibility for ordination to the priesthood.

Alas, church members have had much less success in the matter of structural change.

In fact, the Catholic Church is going through a particularly difficult period of its history. Although the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI have made good-faith efforts to serve the church as faithfully as possible, their appointments to the episcopacy and promotions within it have transformed the pastoral leadership of the church in ways that many Catholics have found exceedingly troublesome.

A smaller group of Catholics, who chafed under the pontificates of John XXIII and Paul VI, are delighted with the conservative turn in the life of the Catholic Church.

The former can only place their trust and their hope in the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, many of them will not live to experience the church's new Pentecost. But it will come.

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