

The Church as Symbolic Mediation: Revelation Ecclesiology in the Theology of Avery Dulles, S.J.

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Recommended Citation

Fisher, Abraham B., "The Church as Symbolic Mediation: Revelation Ecclesiology in the Theology of Avery Dulles, S.J." (2013).
Dissertations (2009 -). Paper 255.
http://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations_mu/255

THE CHURCH AS SYMBOLIC MEDIATION: REVELATION ECCLESIOLOGY IN
THE THEOLOGY OF AVERY DULLES, S. J.

by

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A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,
Marquette University,
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

May 2013

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ABSTRACT
THE CHURCH AS SYMBOLIC MEDIATION: REVELATION ECCLESIOLOGY IN
THE THEOLOGY OF AVERY DULLES, S. J.

Abraham B. Fisher, B.S., M.A.

Marquette University, 2013

This dissertation examines closely the theology of Avery Dulles, S.J., arguing that when Dulles' symbolic-mediation theology of revelation is viewed through the lens of his sacramental ecclesiology, there emerges an ecclesiology that recognizes and emphasizes the revelatory nature of the church. This study constructs this "revelation ecclesiology" by bringing Dulles' signature theologies of the church and revelation into conversation.

At the intersection of those two theologies stands the reality of symbol – a defining characteristic for both the theology of the church as a sacramental reality and the theology of revelation as an event of divine self-communication. The study begins, therefore, by defining the concept of symbol, and the related foundational concepts of revelation, church and sacrament, as they function theologically within Dulles' corpus.

The study then demonstrates the crucial role of symbol in the development of Dulles' sacramental ecclesiology, arguing that the unique efficacy of symbol lies at the heart of the sacramental reality. Because of its sacramental nature, the church demonstrates the efficacy and modality of symbol, but also possesses an ontological connection to Christ, the primordial sacrament. The study continues with a demonstration of Dulles' conviction that the phenomenon of divine revelation is an event of communication with a transactional character. Revelation requires both an offer and a reception in order to realize itself as an accomplished event, however, this reception must be according to the mode of the receiver and thus requires a mediation. Symbol is the reality that is uniquely capable of providing this necessary mediation.

Finally, the study concludes that Dulles' corpus provides evidence that the sacrament of the church functions as precisely that symbolic mediation which characterizes the event of revelation. Thus the sacrament of the church is what Dulles has termed a revelatory symbol, i.e., one which expresses and mediates God's self-communication in Christ. A final chapter concludes the study with an exploration of the implications of the constructed revelation ecclesiology for several significant current theological issues and questions: the mission of the church, the unity of revelation, the possibility and necessity of ecclesial reform, ecumenical dialogue, and the question of the closure of revelation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Abraham B. Fisher, B.S., M.A.

Over the course of this project, I have been blessed with a wide array of supports and encouragements that have been instrumental in bringing it to completion. I am deeply grateful, first of all, for the financial support of the Marquette University Theology Department, in the form of grants and fellowships that have supported, and evinced a confidence in, me and the value of my academic work. I am also very grateful for the support of the Arthur J. Schmidt Foundation for the fellowship that supported my writing and research work during the 2007-2008 academic year.

Secondly, I wish to acknowledge the patient and skillful theological formation I have received at the hands of several outstanding faculty members in the Marquette theology department, especially Dr. Patrick Carey, Dr. Bradford Hinze, Dr. Robert Masson, Dr. Mark Johnson, and Dr. Bryan Massingale. I am indebted to Dr. Carey for his generosity in providing access to his own bibliography of Dulles' published works, and I am grateful for the timely publication of his very helpful biography of the late Cardinal. In addition, I am grateful for the opportunity to have apprenticed as a research and teaching assistant to both Dr. Hinze and Dr. Thomas Hughson, S.J.; the time and effort they invested in me, along with the advice, training, support and advocacy they provided during the early years of my doctoral studies, continue to benefit me daily.

Finally, I reserve a special note of gratitude for Dr. Susan Wood, SCL, who has been a formative influence along every step of my theological training, guiding me not only through coursework, exams and dissertation writing at Marquette, but through my

Master's studies at St. John's University in Collegeville, MN as well. It was because of Dr. Wood's passion for ecclesiology that I have come to appreciate the questions, issues, and study of the church I have always loved, and have embraced ecclesiology as the guiding research focus of my academic career. Dr. Wood's eminently patient and capable guidance in directing this dissertation has nurtured the project along from its first inchoate searchings, through setbacks, restarts and obstacles to its final, merciful conclusion. Her prompt feedback on chapter drafts, insightful analysis, constant support and enthusiasm have been invaluable.

I have also been exceedingly blessed with the support, encouragement and faith of many friends and family members, whose prayers, council, and company I will always cherish. In particular my parents, A. B. and Judy Fisher, and my parents in-law, Marvin and Donna Shoemaker, have been extraordinarily supportive of this work every step of the way, and of the family that it has too often kept me from. Their financial support, patient encouragement and constant prayers for my family, my work and myself have at many times along the road been all that has made it possible, and tolerable, to continue.

Finally, I have been blessed most of all by the love and support of my three sons, Caleb, Connor, and Creighton, who have cheered my progress, and provided gifts of constant joy and the occasional necessary change of pace; and by the steadfast love, patient encouragement, and inspiration of my wonderful wife, Janet. She has worked tirelessly to give me the time I needed for research and writing, prayed vigilantly, and somehow maintained an unwavering faith in the value of this project and its author. My gratitude for her sacrifices, and for the blessing to have walked this road with her, knows no bounds.

The creative theologian is never content either to ignore others or to repeat verbatim what they have said. He seeks to sift out what seems valid and relevant, and to develop, in the light of his own problems and perspectives, the ideas which he sees struggling to be born in the words of others.

– Avery Robert Dulles, S.J., 1969

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INTRODUCTION

Theology at the Intersection of Church and Revelation

Systematic theology, by definition and by its nature, is thoroughly bound up with the enterprise of understanding that which is beyond understanding. Systematic theology concerns itself with, as it was once put to me, “the imponderables” – the explication, so far as the faculties of the finite are capable, of divine mystery. Systematic theology at its best, following the ancient dictum of St. Anselm of Canterbury, pursues its task as *fides quarens intellectum*, being conscious and intentional about empowering the convictions of faith to prevent the pursuit of understanding from doing violence to the dogmas of orthodoxy. At the same time, the enterprise of systematic theology remains fully aware that the object of study, the divine mystery itself, is ponderable only to the extent which that mystery has willed to render itself so. In the absence of revealed truth there can be no question of a theological enterprise, at all.

Likewise, and derivatively, the accessibility to the theologian of revealed truth could hardly be realized at all were it not for the graced community the Christian tradition has come to know as church. This community is necessary on at least three counts. First, it is the chosen target of God’s gracious self-communication. Additionally, it is the environment which gives rise to the symbols through which transcendent reality is expressed in a form accessible to the finite faculties of human persons. It is the community which, by virtue of a shared history, culture, value-system, and tradition, recognizes the interaction with those sensible realities we know as symbols to become revelatory events, thereby empowering them to effect the self-communication willed by God. Finally, operating under the watchful, guiding grace of the Holy Spirit, it is this

community which has the charism of inerrant interpretation, and is thereby empowered to transform the mysterious, symbolic communication of divine mystery into embraceable encounters with the one true God.

This view of the communal reality of the followers of Christ is, unfortunately, by no means universally accepted; the possibility of an individual, immediate, communication of revelation remains for some thinkers an open question. But to even raise the issue is in fact to underscore the point: there is a seemingly inescapable question addressing the theological enterprise at its most fundamental level and arising precisely at the intersection of revelation and church. This dissertation was born of that question: to wit, the church's relationship to, and function within, the communication of divine revelation.

Avery Cardinal Dulles, S. J.

For a consideration of this question, the writings of Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J., seem an obvious choice. I am aware of no body of work more perfectly situated at that intersection than the theological corpus of Avery Dulles. His two best-known works, *Models of the Church* and *Models of Revelation*, survey the range of theological thought on the two subjects, respectively. Though he is perhaps best known for his work in ecclesiology and ecumenism, even a cursory look at his bibliography reveals a corpus on the history and theology of revelation that is no less prolific or important.

By his own account, Dulles conceived of the work of theology first of all in terms of revelation. In 1992, prefacing the revised *Models of Revelation* he summarized, "I believe that theology cannot maintain its identity and vigor if it overlooks this foundational category [of revelation]. While I recognize the limitations of the simplistic

concepts of revelation that were current in some earlier theology, I argue for a restoration of revelation as a primary theological category.”¹ A few years later he published an article on the method of theology in which he presented the vision of the theological enterprise he had come to know and understand, as a practitioner, over the course of a more than sixty-year academic career. “Theology, as I understand it,” he explained, “is a methodical reflection on faith.” He is quick to specify, however, that this reflection on faith is utterly dependent upon that self-disclosure of God which the Christian Tradition has come to consider under the rubric of “revelation”:

Theology has God as its primary object or subject-matter. But it does not study God as an inert object. It reflects on God in his dynamic self-communication. Theological reflection begins by considering God’s outward manifestation in works such as creation, the incarnation, grace, the church, the sacraments, and the word of God. It culminates in a study of the inner self-communication of God, who exists eternally as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. . . .As the term is understood today, theology is a methodical reflection that aims at a coherent body of articulated statements grounded in revelation.²

And yet, Dulles understood better than most that such a methodical reflection cannot be grounded in revelation outside of the community of faith. “Revelation is not complete without the Church,” he teaches, for “the Church . . . is the prime recipient of revelation.”³ For Dulles, revelation is a transaction, and as such, a transmission of God’s self – as knowledge, awareness, experience or encounter – that has both an origin and a destination, an offer and a reception, a commencement and a completion. The worshipping, believing community of disciples – the church – is the community that listens for God’s self-disclosure, receives and interprets it reliably, and responds

¹ Avery Robert Dulles, S. J., *Models of Revelation*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), ix.

²Dulles, “From Symbol to System: A Proposal for Theological Method,” *Pro Ecclesia* 1, no. 1 (1992): 42-52 at 45.

³Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 219.

obediently in faith. Only then does that which God has graciously willed to make known become, in the full sense, “revelation.”

Synopsis of the Project

This dissertation is a work of systematic theology; more precisely, a work of constructive ecclesiology. Its thesis arises at the intersection of revelation and the church, and, in so far as it is successful in constructing an ecclesiology that does justice to the church-revelation relationship, is intended to operate in service to both fundamental theology and ecclesiology. The thesis arises, more specifically, at the intersection of the symbolic-communication concept of revelation and the sacramental concept of the church, consistently embraced by Dulles, which emerge over the course of his career. The work proceeds toward a construction of what I have termed “revelation ecclesiology” from the building blocks within Dulles’ theology. My term “revelation ecclesiology,” will of course be revisited at several places in the pages to follow, and its meaning presented with increasing clarity as the argument unfolds. For now, however, it may suffice to describe it as an ecclesiology that takes full and honest account of the church’s revelatory character.

As his theology developed and matured, Dulles came to embrace distinctive views on both the church and divine revelation. Chapter one, below, will point out that in both cases his understanding of the realities involved is broad, complex, and comprehensive; but there is also in each case a conceptual element Dulles embraced as most personally meaningful, and those concepts together form the starting point of the current investigation. Dulles’ desire for both of his *Models* books was to bring theologians with broadly divergent – sometimes radically opposing – viewpoints into meaningful and

productive conversation, by charting a path toward identifying and appropriating the beneficial elements of every contemporary approach, and honestly admitting to and abandoning those elements of their own view that are problematic.

While Dulles was careful to remain as neutrally objective as possible, in *Models of the Church* he embraced the sacramental model as particularly beneficial both on its own merits and as an instrument of particular potential for an effective reconciliation between the two most diametrically opposed viewpoints: the view of the church strictly in terms of its institutional reality, and the view of the church as essentially a mystical communion. Dulles did not in this work hold up the sacramental model as any kind of normative or overarching model according to which the others should be evaluated. Indeed, he did not shy away from a critical evaluation of its own potential for theological missteps. Rather, the sacramental model of ecclesiology was presented as one model among the others, each with its own “assets” and “liabilities.” However, at the completion of his careful critique and evaluation of the various models, he concluded that “the sacramental model . . . seems to have exceptional capacities for incorporating what is sound in each of the other four models.”⁴ Beyond this, building on his strong symbolic-realist worldview and the pronouncements of Vatican II on the sacramentality of the church, it became increasingly clear that Dulles’ own understanding of the church was deeply integrated with its sacramentality.

In *Models of Revelation*, while the conciliatory intent is the same, the approach is different in one important respect. In this work, Dulles’ symbolic realism is presented up front as a contextual assumption. Hence the symbolic-communication model of

⁴ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, Expanded ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 206.

revelation does *not* function as one model alongside the others. In an addendum to the revised second edition of the work Dulles makes this explicit: “I am not proposing a sixth model, the ‘symbolic,’ to be played off the other five. The variety of models has advantages that should not be sacrificed by the adoption of a single model, however apt.”⁵ Rather than an additional model that Dulles personally favors, as was the case with the sacramental model of the church, here he describes the symbolic approach to revelation as a “dialectical tool.” “Symbol,” he explains, “is a pervasive category that functions, sometimes more dominantly, sometimes more recessively, in each of the five models. The idea of symbolic communication, I believe, can be of great value as a dialectical tool for bringing out the strong points and overcoming the weaknesses in the typical theories we have hitherto examined.”⁶

The current work proceeds therefore not simply by bringing into conversation a theology of revelation and ecclesiology, in general, but rather the specific approaches to those two theological disciplines embraced consistently and fruitfully over the course of Dulles’ many contemplations. When Dulles’ symbolic-communication approach to divine revelation is viewed through the lens of his sacramental ecclesiology, I will argue, the result is an understanding of the church as a participant in, and not simply a herald of, revelation.

Locating the Argument in Dulles’ Thought and Publications

The idea that there is a certain revelatory quality to the very nature of the church was not entirely foreign to Dulles’ thought; nor, it seems, would it have been unpalatable.

⁵ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 128.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Indeed, one encounters within his corpus the occasional suggestion, implication – even casual statement – affirming the church as revelatory. In every instance however, such hints and comments are couched in language that is tentative, cautious, and qualified.

Some examples may best illustrate this tone of cautious hesitancy. Twice, in *Models of Revelation*, Dulles refers to a statement by Bishop Konrad Martin in an address to the Fathers of Vatican I. Bishop Martin, he says, “declared to the Fathers at the Council that the Church is, so to speak, ‘divine revelation in concrete form’;” and a little further on Dulles claims “it is not too much to say with Bishop Martin at Vatican I that the Church, in a sense, *is* revelation – a statement that Barth, with the proper qualifications, also makes.”⁷ In another place Dulles refers to the church as the “sacrament of revelation,”⁸ which, as chapter one will clarify, indicates in Dulles’ parlance both a pointer toward, and an expression of, the reality of its referent. Dulles also refers approvingly to fellow Jesuit Karl Rahner’s teaching that the church is a reality “bearing within herself the reality of the divine self-communication,” a phrase that Dulles frequently uses to refer specifically to divine revelation. In *Models of the Church* Dulles argues that revelation is both Christological and ecclesial; ecclesial because “the Church perpetuates Christ’s sacramental presence in the world, and is thus a sort of continued revelation.” He continues, in similarly carefully qualified language: “The Church is always revelatory in some degree, but is always called to become more revelatory than it is.”⁹ The most explicit description of the nature of the church as revelatory comes in

⁷ Ibid., 218, 200.

⁸ Ibid., 220.

⁹ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 182.

Models of Revelation: “The Church reveals God not so much by what it says about him as by what it is.”¹⁰

Such statements certainly do not constitute a teaching by Dulles that the church is, by nature, revelatory. Neither do they constitute a teaching by Dulles of what I have described earlier in this introduction as “revelation ecclesiology,” that is, a concept of church which “takes full and honest account of the church’s revelatory character.” They do, however, most certainly point to the validity of the claim that a revelation ecclesiology can be discerned within Dulles’ theology, at the intersection of his symbolic-communication approach to revelation and his sacramental ecclesiology.

In his earliest monograph on revelation, *Revelation Theology: A History*, Dulles offers this description of what he considers to be the proper goal of the theologian:

The creative theologian is never content either to ignore others or to repeat verbatim what they have said. He seeks to sift out what seems valid and relevant, and to develop, in the light of his own problems and perspectives, the ideas which he sees struggling to be born in the words of others.¹¹

Such, precisely, is what the current work seeks to accomplish.

Contribution of the Dissertation

Toward that end, the first and principle task of this dissertation is the construction and clear exposition of that ecclesiology I find waiting to be built from the doctrines running through Dulles’ writings. The “revelation ecclesiology” with which this work is concerned does not exist, as such, in Dulles’ corpus; and yet the subtitle I have given the dissertation, “Revelation Ecclesiology in the Theology of Avery Dulles,” is fitting, for the pieces are all in place for the construction and development of such an ecclesiology.

¹⁰ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 219.

¹¹ Dulles, *Revelation Theology: A History* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), 11.

The development of an idea, “struggling to be born” of Dulles’ words, however, requires more than a simple identification; more than making explicit the thoughts that can be discerned between the lines but have as yet remained implied and unexamined. A series of larger questions and issues attends the task.

First, it would seem rather futile to identify such a nascent idea without an accompanying investigation into its worth, rationale, origins, trajectory and its effects on systematic theology in broad review. Why and how the idea came to exist within Dulles’ theology, why it was allowed, or chosen, to remain inchoate, and how it was taught, are all questions which can shed light on both the nature and the usefulness of the doctrine within Dulles’ theological project, for the mission and life of the church, and, going forward, to the systematic project of the theological academy.

Furthermore, the ideas must be, to return to Dulles’ words once more, sifted in order to discern whether they seem “valid and relevant;” and if so, their validity and relevance must be demonstrated and explained. In chapters two and three, below, I sift through Dulles’ teachings of sacramental ecclesiology and revelation as symbolic-communication, respectively, to test their continued relevance in the contemporary context, and validity both in general and for the project at hand. Along the way I consider the nature of the teachings themselves, as they emerge from Dulles’ thought and rise to offer their own unique contribution to the understanding within systematic theology of both revelation and of the church.

Finally, there are implications to be explored. The value of a constructive ecclesiology proposal will be found, in part, in the implications that can be discerned for ecclesiology and for the enterprise of systematic theology as a whole. Every

ecclesiological claim has implications for a host of other dogmas within a coherent theological system. The nature of the church is deeply bound up with the nature of Christ; the nature, gifts and movements of the Holy Spirit; the nature of faith and the faith-response of those who possess it, both individuals and community; the mission of the disciples, again, either individually or in community, and on and on.

As Dulles' career demonstrates, the theology of church is likewise closely associated with the work of ecumenism, for ecumenical dialogue can only succeed to the extent that all of the parties involved have clearly defined ecclesiologies of their own. The addition of 'revelatory' to the category of ecclesial character may create new opportunities for dialogue and greater mutual understanding. Implications of an addition to the theological understanding of the church's nature will likely be felt within the church's ongoing efforts of ecclesial reform, as well. To the extent that the church's self-understanding includes a revelatory character, authentic ecclesial reality assumes a greater importance, urgency, and focus. Such considerations could be multiplied at great length, of course, and thus while chapter five will consider a number of significant implications, the practical limits of this dissertation preclude any claim or attempt to be exhaustive in this regard.

Contours of the Argument

The progression of the argument in this dissertation can be likened to the construction of a pyramid. In two successive stages, more basic theological concepts are juxtaposed, brought to bear upon each other, and built into fewer, but more complex, theological constructs. The first stage is descriptive, concerning the construction done by Dulles, who drew from their four constituent concepts the two compound theological

notions for which he is most famous: sacramental ecclesiology and symbolically mediated revelation. The second stage is the constructive task of the dissertation, bringing these two signature theological notions into conversation, and drawing from them a single complex concept.

Chapter one introduces the building materials, the four theological “foundation stones” that form the pyramid’s base: revelation, symbol, sacrament and church. This chapter is expository in nature, making no attempt to systematically or historically trace the influences that shaped and colored the concepts as they entered Dulles’ theology, or to evaluate and critique the merit and validity of the concepts. The task of this initial chapter is, rather, to simply introduce and describe the foundational theological concepts from which the more complex constructs have been drawn. Critique and evaluation are more usefully employed when considering the validity of Dulles’ *use* of those foundational concepts in his sacramental ecclesiology and symbolic approach to revelation – the task of chapters two and three.

Chapters two and three, respectively, concern themselves with the compound theological concepts which so profoundly influence the length and breadth of Dulles’ theology: a view of the church as a sacramental reality, and a concept of revelation as essentially and necessarily symbolic-communication. Each of these chapters describes the origin, nature, use, and reception of the concept in preparation for its role in the construction of a revelation ecclesiology.

That construction is the task of Chapter four: a demonstration that the church as the universal sacrament of salvation, in its sacramentality, does indeed belong to that class of reality Dulles has designated “revelatory symbol.” As a revelatory symbol the

sacrament of the church participates in the expression, communication, and mediation of that which God wills to make known concerning Himself. En route to this claim there will be cause to examine the surprising fact that, even though Dulles came to appreciate the importance of symbol as integral to bridging the gap between transcendent and immanent reality earlier than he came to really understand and embrace the sacramentality of the church and its implications for the communication of grace, it was the latter which created an environment from which his mature theology of revelation as symbolically mediated could emerge.

A final chapter will, by way of conclusion, consider several of the significant implications a revelation ecclesiology holds for the enterprise of systematic theology as a whole, examine the doctrine's potential for advancing theological understanding and enhancing the spiritual (and ecclesial) life, and attempt to anticipate potential objections.

CHAPTER I
FOUNDATION STONES: AVERY DULLES' THEOLOGY
OF REVELATION, SYMBOL, SACRAMENT, AND CHURCH

Introduction

At the heart of this dissertation lies the juxtaposition of two theological positions which consistently and profoundly characterize the thought of Avery Dulles, and thoroughly imbue his theological corpus. The first is a sacramental view of the church; the second, a theology of revelation built upon the modality of symbolic communication. In the chapters that follow, these two formative theologumena will be presented and considered in greater detail, but before embarking on those considerations, this chapter will seek to provide a necessary grounding in Dulles' use and understanding of the four theological concepts from which they arise: revelation, symbol, sacrament and church.

Dulles has much to say on each of these four basic theological concepts, thus it is not overly difficult to discern the general understanding and principle characteristics that support his use in each regard. However, as the claims of the previous paragraph intimate, it is an altogether more difficult task to isolate his thoughts on any one of these concepts without recourse to one (or in some cases more) of the others. So deeply does symbol influence revelation and sacrament, sacrament influence church, church influence sacrament and revelation and so on, that attempting a description of his thought in what might be considered its "pure" form accomplishes little beyond a distorted and artificially simple caricature. It is neither feasible nor particularly helpful to present Dulles' thought on any one of these concepts in isolation from the others, and therefore I will make no attempt to do so. Rather, I ask patience of the reader as I endeavor to present the concepts sequentially, ever mindful of their intricate interweavings, so that, having

allowed all four to develop, in the end a reasonably full and accurate picture will emerge of the ways in which each of these concepts function within Dulles' larger theological system.

It seems appropriate to begin with the most basic theological datum, divine revelation.

A. Revelation

From the beginning of his formal theological studies at Woodstock College, to the self-reflective final decades of his long and distinguished career, revelation occupied a place of special, formative importance in Dulles' thought and writings. Revelation, for Dulles, stood at the very heart of theological reflection and expression, and it was therefore particularly important that it be understood as rightly and thoroughly as possible. And yet, Dulles was well aware that revelation, having its source in divine reality, could never be adequately described by any human thought, concept, or language. *Models of Revelation* was born of this realization, and of a desire to provide a way past fruitless disagreements, toward some level of mutual consensus, by highlighting both the potential pitfalls and beneficial elements of a variety of theological approaches.¹²

In a preparatory article, published shortly before the book, Dulles noted a certain level of consensus already existing on some basic contours of the dogma:

With a fair degree of unanimity theologians would be willing to describe revelation as the action of God whereby He communicates to intelligent creatures knowledge or awareness of what normally lies beyond their ken. . . . such a disclosure on God's part is a free action motivated by love.

¹² First edition (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983); revised edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992).

Beyond this there is a growing consensus that God's revelation is always in some sense self-revelation.¹³

Dulles himself, in a very early essay, followed roughly these same lines in describing revelation generally as “the whole process by which God draws near to man and manifests his presence.”¹⁴ From these brief statements two significant elements can be singled out. First, revelation is initiated by God, as a free and loving outreach to humanity; it cannot be initiated by humanity because it is by nature beyond anything the human intellect or soul would ever conceive to ask or to seek. In fact, Dulles asserts, revelation must “tell us more than we could conceive and express within the categories derived from our day-to-day experience of the world.”¹⁵ That which is possible to discover by the unaided light of human reason, would not be a self-gift of the transcendent God, and hence would not be revelatory. The basis for a belief in the very fact of revelation is Christian faith that “God is good and merciful, that he wills to communicate himself to man in spite of man's sinfulness and resistance to grace.”¹⁶

Second, revelation is not something external to God, but is a gift of God's own self. In his early publications on the subject, Dulles was explicit about his assumption that “the content of revelation is always God,” but in a qualified way: “not simply in Himself but in relation to our world and ourselves.”¹⁷ In revelation, God not only gives

¹³ Dulles, “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” *Theological Studies* 41, no. 1 (March 1980): 51-73 at 51.

¹⁴ Dulles, “Symbol, Myth and the Biblical Revelation,” *Theological Studies* 27, no 1 (March 1966):1-26 at 13.

¹⁵ Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 60.

¹⁶ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 67.

¹⁷ Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 51.

us an intimate knowledge of Himself, but invites us into the divine reality, as sharers in the divine perspective on the world and “the blessed mystery of God’s own life.”¹⁸

1. **Mystery**

Beyond these basic outlines of a general theology and doctrine of revelation, one can find a number of more specific aspects characteristic of Dulles’ own view as it developed over the course of his career. Perhaps foremost among them is the assertion of revelation as mystery. “Revelation itself,” writes Dulles, “inasmuch as it involves the loving approach of the transcendent God, is an inscrutable mystery.”¹⁹ Dulles’ claim is both a natural and inevitable extension of his insistence that revelation is not only gift, but *self-gift* of God. Given the position noted above that “the content of revelation is always God,” Dulles applies this inevitable sequitur not only to the nature of revelation in general, but to its content as well. But as this content is God in relation to the world, so also “the essential content of revelation is . . . the mystery of God’s being and of his redemptive plan for the world.”²⁰

2. **Mediated**

Furthermore, revelation according to Dulles is always mediated. This is among the most distinctive contributions to revelation theology to come from Dulles’ work, and there will be much more to say on the subject in chapter three, as the details of Dulles’ revelation theology and its mediation by symbol are explored in depth. For now, however, it will suffice to present the more general assertion of the necessity of

¹⁸ Ibid., 60.

¹⁹ Ibid., 63.

²⁰ Dulles, “Handing on the Faith Through Witness and Symbol,” *The Living Light* 27 (1991):295-302 at 300.

mediation for revelation to occur. Dulles affirmed this clearly, and with increasing forcefulness as his doctrine matured: “revelation never occurs in a purely internal experience or as an unmediated encounter with God.”²¹

Always the evenhanded evaluator, Dulles recognized the mediatory potential in a variety of sources, some rather unexpected. The school of thought that claimed revelation is primarily a matter of doctrinal propositions, for example, did not escape a strong critique in *Models of Revelation*,²² yet Dulles did not shy away from recognizing that “the meaning of revelation can be mediated through true propositions.”²³ However, while allowing that revelation (or some element of it, such as its meaning in this case) can be mediated via other realities, Dulles was quick to point out that such mediation is categorically inadequate. An adequate mediation of a transcendent reality requires “an externally perceived sign that works mysteriously on the human consciousness so as to suggest more than it can clearly describe or define” – in other words, symbol.²⁴

Likewise, Dulles recognized in those for whom revelation comes as an “inner experience of the divine” a legitimate, but inadequate insight. While he considers this experientialist approach correct in its claim that revelation “necessarily involves a real union between the human spirit and the God who bestows Himself in grace,” the very experience of that grace is itself necessarily mediated: “[the experience] cannot be rightly interpreted, or recognized for what it is, without the help of symbols derived from the world known through sensory experience.”²⁵

²¹ Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 55.

²² For Dulles’ critique of what he terms the “propositional model” of revelation, see *Models of Revelation*, 48-52.

²³ Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 53.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 55-56. For a fuller treatment of this theme see *Models of Revelation*, 131-134.

²⁵ Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 70.

3. Historical

Although revelation has its source in transcendent, divine reality and is therefore necessarily mystery, it is also, according to Dulles, undeniably historical. Indeed, beyond merely allowing for the possibility that history can play a role in the mediation of revelation, he goes further in claiming that revelation “must be mediated by signs given in history.”²⁶ This is not to say that history, or the great events of divine intervention in human history, are themselves capable of an adequate mediation of revelation – far from it. The historical events themselves are insufficient to mediate revelation unless they are accompanied by an inspired interpretation or prophetic commentary,²⁷ and “unless they are apprehended as symbols.”²⁸

Still, Dulles contends that revelation, and the symbols that mediate it, occur in history and are historically conditioned. In fact, he makes a point of declaring, “I would insist upon a profound affinity between the symbolic and the historical approaches to revelation.”²⁹ The “brute facts of objectivizing history,” he writes, take on the character of revelation when accompanied by a prophetic interpretation: “the authentic commentary,” by God, on God’s own actions.³⁰ God acts in history to accomplish his self-disclosure, and when those acts are given an inspired interpretation they become revelatory symbols for the community of faith. This community interprets the events and oracles of divine revelation historically, bringing to bear the tradition and heritage that gives rise to its shared symbols and gives shape to its identity. Without a historical

²⁶ Ibid., 71.

²⁷ Ibid., 53.

²⁸ Ibid., 68-69.

²⁹ Ibid., 67.

³⁰ Dulles, “The Theology of Revelation,” *Theological Studies* 25, no 1 (March 1964): 43-58 at 51.

consciousness within the community and the individual receiving the revelation, the symbol by which it is communicated would be stripped of its meaning and potency. Revelation, for Dulles, is an event – and the events of divine revelation occur and function as revelation, historically.

4. Communal and Ecclesial

This role of the community of faith in appropriating the historical character of revelation gives rise to a fourth characteristic of Dulles' revelation theology: revelation is a communal, and more specifically, an ecclesial gift and reality. "The Church," he explains, "is the community to which Christ delivered his revelation."³¹ The self-manifestation of God given to the community of faith is inconceivable, according to Dulles, without social symbols – those symbols arising from a shared history and tradition, that define a community and its experience of God.³² This is perhaps particularly true among those who, like Dulles, understand revelation as dependent upon symbol for its communication and achievement. For Dulles and the proponents of what he has termed the "symbolic-communication" model, revelation is ecclesial "because the Church perpetuates Christ's sacramental presence in the world, and is thus a sort of continued revelation."³³ This is not to deny the immediacy of revelation altogether, but to recognize that, in a bit of a paradox, "it comes immediately from God insofar as it becomes actual in the church of God."³⁴ So intimately is it bound up with the church that

³¹ Dulles, "Handing on the Faith," 302.

³² Dulles, "Symbolic Structure of Revelation," 57.

³³ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 181-82.

³⁴ Dulles, "Theological Table-Talk: Revelation in Recent Catholic Theology," *Theology Today* 24, no 3 (October 1967): 350-65 at 365.

“it may be said that revelation is not complete without the Church.”³⁵ The revelatory dogmas “are valid because they can be interpreted within a context of myth and symbol” – a context created and preserved by the community of faith.³⁶

5. Dependent Upon Faith

The character of revelation as given to and received within a community of faith leads rather naturally to the additional conclusion that revelation requires a faith response. Dulles claims precisely this: true revelation never exists without such a response, for it must be discerned, and proper discernment requires a “spiritually attuned consciousness” formed in faith.³⁷ There are any number of created realities that could potentially function as a revelatory symbol, but only those that have been chosen by God to be an instrument of divine self-expression and disclosure, and to communicate something meaningful about the relationship of God to humanity and the world, can be authentically revelatory. Authority under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is given to the community of believers, creating an environment within which revelatory symbols can be discerned and appropriated. The faith of the believer, expressed and enacted in and through this community, prepares the believer to receive and accept the meaning communicated by such revelatory symbols, and constitutes the only appropriate response.

The previous section presented Dulles’ claim that “revelation is not complete without the church;” it is now possible to shed some additional light on why that is so. Revelation is not complete without the church because it is the church, as community of faith, that makes it possible for revelation to “achieve itself.” In the theology of Dulles,

³⁵ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 219-20.

³⁶ Dulles, “Revelation in Recent Catholic Theology,” 365.

³⁷ Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 71.

revelation is never a one-sided gift; it is either a transaction consisting of both an offer and a reception, or it does not occur at all. But, he argues, “if there were no community of believers, revelation as a transaction would be cut short.” Therefore “revelation, as a communication from God to human beings, destined for their conversion and redemption, achieves itself only when it is received and responded to in faith.”³⁸

6. Interpreted

It is not unreasonable to simply include the revelatory characteristic “interpretation” within the ecclesial character discussed above, for indeed it is the church which is given the authority, the charism, and the responsibility to interpret the meaning of the divine oracles for the life of faith. To do so however, would I believe, risk understating the importance of this characteristic in its own right. The claim of Dulles is not just that the church has the opportunity and responsibility to interpret revelation as if it already exists in an uninterpreted state awaiting ecclesial action. Rather, for Dulles, in order for a divine self-expression to be revelation for the community and its members, it must be given a divinely inspired and authoritative interpretation.

³⁸ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 220. Some authors, including Karl Rahner, would be uncomfortable with this assertion, and wish to alter it by including the qualifier “fully” – i.e., revelation achieves itself *fully* only when received and responded to in faith. This stipulation reveals the assumptions that revelation exists as a reality independent of its reception, and that revelation can be (and is) received by degree. Such a view would argue that revelation achieves itself fully only in eschatological perspective.

Dulles would, I believe, concur that revelation is not perfectly or fully achieved in this, temporal, reality in so far as the divine mystery cannot be fully or perfectly received by finite beings. However, because Dulles conceives of revelation as a completed transaction, and develops his revelation theology on the basis of this understanding, he is able to say without qualification that revelation does not come into existence (achieve itself) until it is received. This does not specifically exclude the understanding that the event of revelation that comes to achievement in the reception is never full, or perfect. Dulles could say, with Rahner, that that which is received by the human person (or community) is always partial and imperfect. What Dulles does not accept is a definition of revelation, which appears to be operative in Rahner’s theology, that allows for a reality properly called “revelation” that has not yet been received. Dulles insists that it is not revelation properly so-called until it is received; it is, therefore, “revelation” to whatever extent or degree it has been received.

Since Vatican II, it has been a matter of official church doctrine that Jesus Christ is “the fullness of all revelation” (*Dei Verbum* 2). Dulles, however, clarifies this teaching as follows: “The mere fact of Christ, taken as an objectively certifiable occurrence, is not yet revelation, but when met by a believing interpretation which captures its true significance, it becomes revelation in a special and altogether unique sense. God’s self-revelation in Jesus therefore comes to fulfillment only in the human discovery whereby it is received.”³⁹

7. Both Complete and On-going

The question concerning the closure of revelation will resurface in the concluding chapter, and at that point, building upon a careful analysis of the intricate interrelationships involving revelation in its various forms, it will be possible to address the question in a more substantial and sophisticated manner. At this early point it is possible only to describe the basic distinction that allows Dulles to speak simultaneously of revelation’s completion and continuation, and – importantly – draw attention to the question as a further significant element in Dulles’ revelation theology.

Dulles leaves no room for doubt that the revelation given in and by Jesus Christ is definitive: “Revelation is complete in Jesus Christ, since there can be no disclosure above or beyond that whereby God fully and unsurpassably communicates himself to the world in the life, teaching, death, and glorification of his Son.”⁴⁰ And yet, as has already been noted, it is *not* complete, according to Dulles, without the church. Indeed, “as a living

³⁹ Dulles, “Revelation and Discovery,” in *Theology and Discovery: Essays in Honor of Karl Rahner, S. J.*, ed. William J. Kelly, S.J. (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980), 1-29 at 23.

⁴⁰ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 219.

idea, revelation continually gives birth to new dogmatic insights.”⁴¹ Here again we see the completion of revelation given by Christ juxtaposed with the ongoing authoritative, Spirit-guided interpretations of the church, for surely that is the loci of “dogmatic insights.”

Dulles is able to hold these two assertions simultaneously because of a distinction he makes between an original “constitutive” or “definitive” revelation – which is complete – and the continuing communicative acts of God through the church. “Constitutive revelation” has been completed with the completion of the New Testament, Dulles insists; however, God continues to speak in various ways “provided that they are not seen as adding to the content of the definitive revelation given in the incarnate Son.”⁴² Dulles sees the reality of revelation, and the communication of revelation already given, as two distinct things. Concerning the former, any sense of continuation is debatable at best, but concerning the latter, ongoing communication of revelation does continue to occur.⁴³ The symbol, as shall be discussed shortly, provides an “inexhaustible depth of meaning” that can be continuously mined for greater and deeper insights into a revelation that has been given once, definitively. Dulles’ doctrine that revelation is only achieved when it is received provides for an understanding of revelation that is given once, definitively, in Christ, but received, piecemeal and continuously, as insights and understanding grow.

⁴¹ Dulles, “From Images to Truth: Newman on Revelation and Faith,” *Theological Studies* 51, no. 2 (June 1990): 252-267 at 257.

⁴² Dulles, “Revelation as the Basis for Scripture and Tradition,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 21, no. 2 (April 1997): 104-120 at 111.

⁴³ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 220.

8. Christological and Incarnational

Finally, revelation for Dulles is both profoundly Christological and undeniably incarnational. As just mentioned, revelation is both definitive as regards what has been given, and continuing as regards what is being received. What has been given as definite revelation, what is, in Dulles' parlance, "constitutive revelation" is the Christ event, as recorded either by eyewitnesses or those within one generation of His ascension. Hence revelation is profoundly Christological because Christ is at the center of the revelatory self-gift: Furthermore, "It is Christological," says Dulles, "because Christ, as the Incarnate Word, expresses and communicates the unsurpassable self-donation of the divine."⁴⁴

It is no mere repetition to assert that beyond its Christological character, revelation is also undeniably incarnational. Dulles stresses this point in opposition to those currently within revelation theology who, focused on the revelatory word as "the Word of God," would tend to overvalue the transcendent and mystical element of this word. Dulles is intent to remind his readers that, "it is not enough to speak of the word of God, for Christianity stands or falls with the affirmation that the Word has been made flesh."⁴⁵

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Revelation is a rich and complex concept in Dulles' theology. It is most intricately bound up with a view of the world he himself came to describe as "symbolic-realism," but to constrain the place of revelation in Dulles' overall theological system to

⁴⁴ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 181-182.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

its mediation by symbol would be an oversimplification. Dulles' theology of revelation, though it certainly developed, matured and became more confident as his career and thought progressed, was remarkably consistent. As early as 1980 he summarized the key requirements for what he considered to be an adequate theology of revelation, and these remained true, relevant and significant through both editions of *Models of Revelation* and beyond. Revelation, for Dulles, must be "a free and loving self-manifestation of God;" it must be mediated, mediated specifically by symbols, and by symbols given in history; it must "bring the believer into a living, personal contact with the divine;" and, finally, revelation must be a gift beyond the reach of human discernment and discovery. It "cannot be objectively demonstrated from facts accessible to academic history."⁴⁶

B. Symbol

Having now outlined and described just one of the "foundation stones" with which this chapter is concerned, it is already apparent that the concept and category of symbol is present – sometimes explicitly, other times implicitly – but operative nonetheless throughout Dulles' theology, philosophy, and larger worldview.

What appeared to be an area of simple academic interest in the very early years of Dulles' education and training, grew to the status of underlying assumption and guide as he began to develop a more systematic theology of revelation, sacrament, church and beyond. The unique power and modality of symbol is, as Dulles made clear in increasingly strong statements, a reality that is fundamental to the communication of persons: both the communication of thoughts and ideas from one human person to another, and, more to the point at hand, the communication of personal reality between

⁴⁶ Dulles, "Symbolic Structure of Revelation," 71.

God and humanity. In short, the reality, and communicative power, of symbol is what makes revelation possible.

In the reflections added to his 50th anniversary edition of *A Testimonial to Grace*, Dulles relates how he came to appreciate the importance of symbol for a theology of revelation through the writings of Paul Tillich.⁴⁷ In the early 1950s Dulles was being guided by Fr. Gustave Weigel in a directed reading project on Protestant theology, and was thereby introduced to Tillich's work.⁴⁸ The result of this reading program was an article devoted to an explication of Tillich's theology of biblical revelation, in which Tillich's use of symbol, and Dulles' appreciation for the importance of symbol in revelation, are unmistakable.⁴⁹

While Tillich may have introduced Dulles to the importance of symbol for a theology of revelation, a keen interest in the use and power of the symbol, in general, was evident early and broadly in Dulles' publications. In one of his better known early publications, a study of St. Cyprian's ecclesiology, Dulles makes careful note, and good use, of "Cyprian's favorite metaphor, the symbol of the Church which echoes through all his writings. The Church is mother."⁵⁰ Even before this, Dulles experienced the power and communicative modality of the symbol from the inside, as a participant and recipient, not merely from the more external-analytical vantage point of the academic.⁵¹ In his

⁴⁷ Dulles, *A Testimonial to Grace and Reflections on a Theological Journey*, 50th Anniversary ed. (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1996), 104.

⁴⁸ Patrick W. Carey, *Avery Cardinal Dulles, SJ: A Model Theologian, 1918-2008* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2010), 120.

⁴⁹ Dulles, "Paul Tillich and the Bible," *Theological Studies* 17, no. 3 (1956): 345-367.

⁵⁰ Dulles, "Church Unity and Roman Primacy in the Doctrine of St. Cyprian," *The Theologian* 9 (1954): 33-48 at 41.

⁵¹ In his writings concerning symbol Dulles was, of course, never strictly "external" to the symbol nor simply analytic. As a believer and active participant in the Christian faith and the community of Christian believers (the church), he was in his theological writings always writing about a reality and an experience

Testimonial to Grace – the original, 1946 material, written before “Reflections on a Theological Journey” were added for the 50th anniversary edition – Dulles recalls how the power of symbol overcame him at a pivotal point in his journey of intellectual development, of spiritual discernment, and of life, to communicate God’s gracious self-offer:

This offering occurred, suddenly and quite unexpectedly, on one grey February afternoon like many another. . . . I was irresistibly prompted to go out into the open air. . . . As I wandered aimlessly, something impelled me to look contemplatively at a young tree. On its frail, supple branches were young buds attending eagerly the spring which was at hand. While my eye rested on them the thought came to me suddenly, with all the strength and novelty of a revelation, that these little buds in their innocence and meekness followed a rule, a law of which I as yet knew nothing. How could it be, I asked, that this delicate tree sprang up and developed and that all the enormous complexity of its cellular operations combined together to make it grow erectly and bring forth leaves and blossoms? The answer, the trite answer of the schools, was new to me: that its actions were ordered to an end by the only power capable of adapting means to ends – intelligence – and that the very fact that this intelligence worked toward an end implied purposiveness – in other words, a will. It was useless, then, to dismiss these phenomena by obscurantist talk about a mysterious force called “Nature.” The “nature” which was responsible for these events was distinguished by the possession of intellect and will, and intellect plus will makes personality.⁵²

This eloquent anecdote provides meaningful insight into the importance of symbol in directing the course of, not only Dulles’ theological thought and doctrines, but his life as well. When Dulles writes about the necessity of symbol, the power of symbolic communication, and the effects of the symbol on consciousness, commitment, knowledge, awareness and ideology, he is writing about a reality and a transformation he knows both through careful scholarship and study, and from profound personal

from the vantage point of experience, while at the same time attempting to analyze that experience, its sources, power, and effects.

⁵² Dulles, *A Testimonial to Grace*, 35-36.

experience. It is little wonder then that, explicit or implicit, symbol is never far removed from whatever topic Dulles is investigating.

Symbol, for Dulles, like revelation, is a complex and mysterious reality. It cannot be adequately described or defined by any single concept or idea, and therefore, like revelation, is best understood at the intersection of its myriad characteristics, powers and effects. The following sampling of those characteristics, as they have appeared in Dulles' many presentations of symbol and symbolic communication, will help flesh out the function of this foundational concept within Dulles' theological system and corpus.

1. Sign, and Beyond Sign

When Dulles set about to define or describe the concept of symbol as it functions in his theology, he presented it, with remarkable consistency, as a type or subset of what he considered to be a much simpler reality: "sign." There is no doubt that for Dulles symbol is first of all a sign – an element of creation or of history discernible by the human senses and interpretable by human intellect. But symbol is also carefully distinguished as a distinct subset within the larger category of sign. It possesses a power of communication and a depth of meaning far exceeding an ordinary indicator. A simple sign is characterized by a single, indicative meaning, whereas symbol comprises both the indicative function of the sign and the evocative power of suggestion.

Occasionally, Dulles' will reference a clearly polyvalent and efficacious reality under the rubric of sign rather than symbol. In such instances Dulles has in mind not the "simple indicator" characterized by a one-to-one relationship with the reality it signifies, but a concept in keeping with the fourth Gospel's use of "sign" to describe the highly symbolic acts (miracles) and teachings of Jesus. For example, Dulles writes that "God

makes Himself known through the sign of a human existence which refers itself totally to the divine person who possesses it as His very own.”⁵³ Furthermore, at times the two terms are used by Dulles in a manner that can only be interpreted as functionally synonymous, as when he claims that “the great sign or symbol of God in the world is, of course, the man Jesus Christ, in whom God dwells invisibly.”⁵⁴ While this occasional double usage does introduce an unfortunate confusion, within the corpus as a whole the distinction remains real, and consistent. Indeed, where Dulles is concerned to define the mysterious reality of symbol with any sort of precision, he begins by situating his exploration of the symbol’s character squarely within the concept of sign, followed immediately by a recognition of the important ways that the potency and modality of symbol surpasses “ordinary” signs.

“Very briefly,” he begins, “we may say that a symbol is a type of sign.”⁵⁵ It is, of course “a special type,”⁵⁶ or “a particular type,”⁵⁷ of sign, but like other signs the symbol is “a word, gesture, picture, statue, or some other type of reality which can be made present to the senses or the imagination, and which points to a reality behind itself.”⁵⁸ However, the reality behind a simple indicator is another, clearly definable reality, as for example, placing one’s fingers on the lips indicates a request for silence. The reality behind the symbol, in contrast, “is one which cannot be precisely described or defined; it is not knowable, at least with the same richness and power, except in and through the symbol.” Hence the symbol has the power to not only indicate, but to evoke, meaning.

⁵³ Dulles, “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 73.

⁵⁴ Dulles, “Handing on the Faith,” 300.

⁵⁵ Dulles, “Symbol, Myth and the Biblical Revelation,” 2.

⁵⁶ Dulles, “Symbol in Revelation,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 13, ed. Editorial Staff at the Catholic University of America (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 662-664 at 662.

⁵⁷ Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 56.

⁵⁸ Dulles, “Symbol, Myth and the Biblical Revelation,” 2

Working at the affective level (the emotions, will and imagination) as well as the cognitive (sensible, intellectual), symbol possesses “an existential power which is lacking to purely conventional or conceptual signs.”⁵⁹ Through its combination of sensible sign and transcendent referent, the symbol brings together two realities in a particularly potent way. The symbolic sign is an element of sensible reality, but yet it “betokens that which cannot be directly perceived, properly described, or adequately defined by abstract concepts.” By suggesting meaning in excess of that which is sensibly indicated, it “discloses something that man could not otherwise know.”⁶⁰

Finally, it must be recognized that Dulles’ theology of symbol, and perhaps particularly his understanding of the existential power of the symbolic sign, was deeply influenced by an article by German Jesuit, Karl Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol.” By his own description, Dulles’ term “presentative symbol” which effects a certain kind of presence of the reality signified and which he contrasts to a merely representative symbol, “corresponds approximately to what Karl Rahner has called “symbolic reality.” “In the strictest sense,” writes Dulles, “‘symbol’ is what Rahner calls a ‘real symbol’ or ‘symbolic reality’ (in German *Realsymbol*), that is to say, a sign whereby something realizes itself as other.”⁶¹

2. Plenitude of Meaning

Two striking aspects of the symbol’s meaning distinguish it most powerfully and most clearly from other types of signs. The first of these is the fact that the meaning communicated via a symbolic reality is characterized by excess, plenitude,

⁵⁹ Ibid., 2-3.

⁶⁰ Dulles, “Symbol in Revelation,” 662.

⁶¹ Dulles, “From Symbol to System,” 44.

overabundance, surplus: too much meaning, that is to say, for a human observer-participant to receive or comprehend. Dulles uses a number of images to convey this truth, such as “A symbol is a sign pregnant with a plenitude of meaning”⁶² and “its distinctive mark is not the absence of meaning but the surplus of meaning.”⁶³ Hence for Dulles, the meaning conveyed by the symbol does not so much escape the intellect as overwhelm it. The symbol’s meaning is described as a surplus because it first recapitulates and then far surpasses “whatever can be expressed in formal statements. . . . [symbols] work upon our tacit powers and enable us to apprehend, in an obscure way, what we cannot explain, even to ourselves.”⁶⁴

This lack of thorough apprehension or explanation does not, however, necessarily impinge upon the truth contained in, and communicated by, the symbol. “Symbols have a type of truth peculiar to themselves,” Dulles claims. “They are true to the extent that they adequately reflect the revelatory situation which they are intended to express.”⁶⁵ Revelation, as has already been shown, is a divine mystery and therefore by nature ultimately inexhaustible; it is, however, also thoroughly imbued with divine truth. Likewise, as signs of transcendent reality, the meaning contained in and communicated by the symbol is inexhaustible – a surplus, plenitude, or overabundance. It does not follow from this fact, however, that the inability of human persons to receive the full measure of meaning from a symbol in any way negates or diminishes the truth of that

⁶² Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 132.

⁶³ Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 66.

⁶⁴ Dulles, “Handing on the Faith,” 301.

⁶⁵ Dulles, “Paul Tillich and the Bible,” 349.

meaning which is received. At the very least, “symbols give rise to true affirmations about what is antecedently real.”⁶⁶

Dulles insists that not only is the symbol capable of communicating truth, in fact it *must* have a truth to it. It must have a connection with reality or it would not be able to function symbolically. As an example, Dulles offers the fact of Christ as truth itself and the “supreme religious symbol,” arguing that “for Christ to be effectively a symbol for us, He must be manifested for what He is.”⁶⁷ In other words, there must be a real integrity between the reality behind the symbol and the meaning it communicates. If this condition is met, “a symbol can convey a richer and more personal apprehension of reality in its deeper dimensions than propositional language can do.”⁶⁸

The plenitude of meaning which distinguishes symbol from other, ordinary, signs can be further understood as polyvalence. Driving Dulles’ contention that symbolic reality is characterized by an overabundance of meaning is the realization that symbol is not limited to the communication of any one particular meaning (however “abundant” it may be). As Dulles puts it, “Frequently symbols do not have any one determinate meaning, but evoke a whole gamut of related significances.”⁶⁹ These “related significances,” furthermore, maintain the nature of definite truth, for “by putting us in touch with deeper aspects of reality symbolism can generate an indefinite series of particular insights.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 267.

⁶⁷ Dulles, “Symbol, Myth and the Biblical Revelation,” 4.

⁶⁸ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 142.

⁶⁹ Dulles, “Symbol in Revelation,” 662.

⁷⁰ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 137.

3. Evocative Power

In addition to its plenitude or overabundance, there is a second foundational aspect of the symbol's meaning, differentiating it from that of ordinary signs: its power to evoke meaning from the beholder or participant, rather than simply supplying it as if from an external source. Symbol itself is, of course, external to the beholder – “an externally perceived sign,” to be exact – but “works mysteriously on the human consciousness so as to suggest more than it can clearly describe or define.”⁷¹ Dulles describes this power variously, as the ability to “evoke” meaning, the power to suggest meaning by working at the level of the imagination and emotions, even occasionally as a power that operates beneath the level of conscious awareness. Symbols, he writes, “speak to man existentially and find an echo in the inarticulate depths of his psyche.” The evocative power of the symbol enables it to “convey a latent meaning that is apprehended in a nonconceptual, even a subliminal, way.”⁷²

The power to evoke, or draw forth, meaning from the beholder corroborates the power of the symbol to communicate an abundance of meaning. If the meaning of the symbol were “explicitly stated” (as is the case with a simple indicator), it could be no more than singular. As it is, however, the symbol's meaning is comprehended by its beholder “not by discursive reasoning but by a kind of synthetic insight.”⁷³ It has the power to suggest and evoke, rather than simply impart, meaning precisely because its realm of influence is not limited to the cognitive faculties. Because, in other words, it “addresses itself not simply to the senses and the abstractive intelligence, but to the entire

⁷¹ Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 55-56.

⁷² Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 20.

⁷³ Dulles, “Symbol in Revelation,” 662.

human psyche.”⁷⁴ Symbol does not reach out to communicate meaning to an un-moved beholder; it functions symbolically only when the beholder enters into the symbol and submits to its evocative influence. “The symbol changes the point of view, the perspectives, the outlook of the addressee. They grasp what is meant by sharing in the world indicated by the symbol.”⁷⁵

4. Four Distinctive Properties

After many years of study, and a great many publications, on symbolic communication and its function within a theology of revelation, Dulles came to his most systematic treatment in *Models of Revelation*. As Dulles built his case for the advantages of the symbolic-communication model of revelation a key passage sought to draw out the striking parallels that can be discerned in the functions and effects of revelation and symbol.⁷⁶ Dulles focuses in this passage on what he considers the four most distinctive properties of symbol: participatory knowledge, transforming effect, influence on commitments, and expanded awareness.

a. Participatory Knowledge

“In the first instance,” says Dulles, “symbolic knowledge is . . . participatory and implicit.”⁷⁷ Passive speculation does not allow the symbol to function as a medium of communication, thus it gives “not speculative but participatory knowledge – knowledge,

⁷⁴ Dulles, “Symbol, Myth and the Biblical Revelation,” 2.

⁷⁵ Dulles, *A Church to Believe In: Discipleship and the Dynamics of Freedom* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 47.

⁷⁶ See *Models of Revelation*, 136-137. These advantages, along with reviews and critiques from peers in the academy, will be examined in more detail as part of Chapter three, below, on Dulles’ revelation theology.

⁷⁷ Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, 47

that is to say, of a self-involving type.”⁷⁸ While the knowledge achieved via participation in the symbol is not permanently restricted to the implicit, it does originate as implicit, tacit awareness. It is “only through a subsequent process of reflection” that it is able to “become, in some measure, objective and explicit.”⁷⁹ The symbol communicates by inviting the beholder to become part of the world of meaning it creates, and to submit, willingly, to its evocative power. In allowing the symbol to operate within the intellect, imagination and emotions the beholder becomes part of the symbol and the community which sustains it. In such submission, the symbol becomes powerful and communicative, thus “to enter the world of meaning opened up by the symbol we must give ourselves; we must be not detached observers but engaged participants.”⁸⁰ For Dulles, this is especially true in the case of revelatory symbols: “the symbols by which God discloses himself have a significance that can be perceived only by a person who submits to their power.”⁸¹ The theory of symbolic-realism that Dulles advocates insists that there are elements of reality and truth that are simply inaccessible to the intellect alone. “By eliciting participation,” however, symbol can engage all the faculties of the human person, and “convey a richer and more personal apprehension of reality in its deeper dimensions than nonsymbolic language can do.”⁸²

Furthermore, because symbol yields its meaning only through participation, it must be understood as an event – an encounter with transcendent reality – and not simply an object. “A symbol is never a sheer object,” Dulles urges. “It speaks to us only

⁷⁸ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 136.

⁷⁹ Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, 47.

⁸⁰ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 133.

⁸¹ Dulles, “From Symbol to System,” 44.

⁸² Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 66.

insofar as it lures us to recognize ourselves within the universe of meaning and value which it opens up to us.”⁸³ On this point Dulles follows liturgist Nathan Mitchell, and quotes him approvingly: “A symbol is not an object to be manipulated through mime and memory, but an environment to be inhabited. Symbols are places to live, breathing spaces that help us discover the possibilities that life offers. . . . To put the matter succinctly, every symbol deals with a new discovery and every symbol is an open-ended action, not a closed-off object. By engaging in symbols, by inhabiting their environment, people discover new horizons for life, new values and motivation.”⁸⁴

b. Personal Transformation

Secondly, and following perhaps very naturally from the necessity of the observer to participate in its meaning-world, symbol has the power to transform the beholder in profound and comprehensive ways.⁸⁵ So profound, in fact, that Dulles does not hesitate to describe this transformative effect as a type of re-creation or re-birth, claiming that symbols, like “the twisted imagery of the seer, the denunciation of the prophet, and the joyful tidings of the apostle,” are empowered to produce “the new life of which they speak.”⁸⁶ Neither is the transformative power of the symbol subtle. Dulles notes also that Christian symbols, at least, “call for openness; they both demand and make possible a radical change in the hearers’ attitudes and behavior.”⁸⁷

⁸³ Ibid., 61.

⁸⁴ Nathan Mitchell, “Symbols Are Actions, Not Objects,” *Living Worship* 13, no. 2 (February 1977): 1-4 at 1-2, quoted in Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 61.

⁸⁵ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 136-137.

⁸⁶ Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 72.

⁸⁷ Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System* (New York: Crossroad, 1992; expanded edition New York: Crossroad, 1995), 21.

Furthermore the transformation brought about by a submission to and participation in the symbol is comprehensive: the whole person, and not only one faculty, is changed in an open and participatory encounter with symbol. In the first place, symbols “have an aesthetic appeal, and are apprehended not simply by the mind, but by the imagination, the heart, or, more properly, the whole man.”⁸⁸ Dulles elaborates further that the symbol “speaks not only to the reflective intelligence but to the entire human psyche. It arouses deep emotional experience, releases hidden energies in the soul, gives strength and stability to the personality, establishes strong loyalties, and disposes a man for consistent and committed action.”⁸⁹ Some of these specific transformations will be discussed under their own headings, below; for now let it suffice to say that the personal transformation effected by the symbol reaches beyond knowledge and emotion, beyond imagination and the psyche, to worldview, decision-making, and action.

Finally, the transformative power of the symbol at times manifests itself as healing. This healing can take the form of unifying diverse, and apparently incompatible realities, within its multivalent nature, “thus enabling human life to be integrated into the totality of being.”⁹⁰ In other instances, the transformation wrought by symbol works to restore loyalties, attachments or aspirations, or reorient those that have become unhealthy and destructive, and elevate the beholder’s perception of reality to the level of an integrated whole.⁹¹ Dulles points out specifically how the practice of psychotherapy has

⁸⁸ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 20.

⁸⁹ Dulles, “Symbol in Revelation,” 663.

⁹⁰ Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 63.

⁹¹ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 20.

appropriated the use of symbols to “transform consciousness” and in the process heal the sick personality.⁹²

c. Strengthened Commitments

Thirdly, the powerful personal transformation brought about through an encounter with symbol reinvigorates commitment to the mission and values of the community, and to the community itself. According to Dulles, the symbol “stirs the imagination, releases hidden energies in the soul, gives strength and stability to the personality, and arouses the will to consistent and committed action.” This long list of effects on the commitment of the symbol’s beholder is rather lofty; but a brief consideration of the effects of a national flag, a sports emblem or even a corporate logo, validates them. Thus Dulles can summarize, “For this reason all important social and political movements have felt the need to equip themselves with appropriate symbols.”⁹³

d. Expanded Awareness

Finally, the fourth distinctive property of symbol appropriated by Dulles is an expanded awareness of reality that rises to the level of conscious thought through encounter with symbol: “symbol introduces us into realms of awareness not normally accessible to discursive thought.”⁹⁴ Thus the “new awareness” created by the symbol is not only an awareness previously undiscovered or unknown, it is rather undiscoverable in the absence of the symbol’s unique combination of effects.

⁹² Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 136-137; quoting Victor White, a student of Carl Jung. Cf. White, *God and the Unconscious* (Cleveland, Ohio: Meridan Press, 1952), 233-34.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

In the case of religious symbols, specifically, the divine reality behind the symbol's sensory sign, gives the expanded awareness a decidedly revelatory character. Biblical symbols, for example, "impart a tacit, lived awareness of the God who has manifested himself of old," Dulles writes. "Symbols . . . arouse a genuine awareness of the divine itself – an awareness that always surpasses all that we can say about it."⁹⁵ While this awareness may not in some cases approach the conscious understanding that comes from explicit doctrinal propositions, it is nonetheless powerfully felt, experienced, and therefore often more deeply and personally appropriated. Those who embrace the symbol by participating in the world of meaning it creates and submitting themselves to be transformed by their encounter with the reality signified, "are able to apprehend reality, as it were, through the eyes of their predecessors in the faith."⁹⁶

5. Revelatory

The revelatory character of symbol is developed and discussed in much more detail in chapter three, which is focused on Dulles' doctrine of the necessity of symbol and symbol's particular mode of communication, for an adequate theology of revelation. Here, I will simply seek to provide the groundwork for that discussion by sketching out some specifics of the revelatory aspects of symbol in Dulles' theology.

The discussion above regarding symbol's power to create a "new awareness" focused on presenting Dulles' view that this new awareness is very often an awareness of God Himself. In such cases, it is no stretch to speak of a certain revelatory element in the symbol's overall effect. The new awareness may not be sufficiently explicit to merit the

⁹⁵ Dulles, "Symbolic Structure of Revelation," 70.

⁹⁶ Dulles, *Craft of Theology*, 24.

term revelation, as that term is usually understood and applied, but it is sufficient for Dulles to claim that symbols as such are in some sense revelatory,” in so far as they “communicate levels of meaning and reality that are not accessible through immediate experience or conceptual thought.”⁹⁷

While such symbols are “in some sense revelatory,” they are not yet what Dulles defines specifically as fully functioning “revelatory symbols,” that is, “those which express and mediate God’s self-communication.”⁹⁸ Before a symbol can ascend to this definition it must first be properly interpreted. It was argued above that in Dulles’ thought, revelation does not exist as revelation unless it is accompanied by an authoritative interpretation, hence it follows that what he terms “revelatory symbols” have the same requirement: “The symbol becomes revelation only when interpreted.”⁹⁹

Furthermore, even symbols that have been properly and authoritatively interpreted, are only revelatory if they retain a discernible distinction-in-expression from the divine reality to which they point. “For those who fail to recognize the infinite distance between the revelatory symbol and the divine, the tension that gives life to the symbols collapses and the symbols lose their eloquence.”¹⁰⁰ Thus while Dulles recognizes that according to the New Testament, Jesus Christ is “the supreme religious symbol,” he also cautions that “for Christ to be effectively a symbol for us, He must be manifested for what He is.”¹⁰¹ If the distinction between Christ as symbol and Christ as symbolized is blurred, the truth of the symbol is diminished and its connection with

⁹⁷ Dulles, “Symbol in Revelation,” 663.

⁹⁸ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 131.

⁹⁹ Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 72.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁰¹ Dulles, “Symbol, Myth and the Biblical Revelation,” 4.

reality obscured; the symbol disappears and no longer functions symbolically for the community of faith.

6. Communal and Ecclesial

The community of faith, just mentioned, is a crucial component to the reality of symbol in Dulles' theology. Symbol's do not exist – neither arise, nor function – in the absence of the shared history, tradition, and mission that form communal identity. Dulles quotes C. H. Dodd to emphasize this point: symbols, according to Dodd, “derive their significance” from a “background of thought.”¹⁰² This “background of thought,” of course, is created by the shared experiences, values and history of the community. Without this common point of reference, the symbol could not communicate meaning reliably. Dulles recognizes that, given the necessity of interpretation, and of a shared “background of thought,” the symbol's communal character also requires a stance of individual humility vis-à-vis the community: “Because the symbols of faith cannot be reliably interpreted except from within the community of faith, submission to the community and its leaders is still necessary to gain access to the Christian heritage.”¹⁰³ This comment is obviously framed in terms of religion and faith, but the point is applicable to any community and its symbols.

Not only is the community essential for a particular sign to function as symbol, but, Dulles claims, the system of symbols is likewise essential for the identity and preservation of the community. Dulles makes this point forcefully: “religions are predominantly characterized by their symbols. The Christian religion is a set of

¹⁰² Ibid., 5. Reference is to Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, Eng., 1958), 137.

¹⁰³ Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, 106.

relationships with God mediated by the Christian symbols.”¹⁰⁴ This is a strong statement in favor of the view that symbols are not incidental to communal life, but are essential to its existence. Furthermore, in the absence of some structure with which to preserve the way of life characteristic of a community’s identity, that identity would be at risk of disappearing. Thus, “The Catholic church as a whole must have a system of meanings, historically transmitted, embodied in symbols, and instilled into its members so that they are inclined to think, judge, and act in characteristic ways.”¹⁰⁵

There is a strong sense of synergy in the relationship between a community, ecclesial community perhaps most particularly, and its symbols. The community gives rise to symbols by providing the context – the shared history, experience and identity – within which the symbol can achieve meaning or significance; gives the symbol its power by submitting to its invitation for participation in its world of meaning, and interpreting its communication into a meaningful encounter with a transcendent, divine reality. The symbol, on the other hand, forms, strengthens and preserves the community; gives the community its identity and facilitates the transmission of doctrines, practices, values, identity and mission from one generation to the next. This “process of handing on the faith,” Dulles asserts, “is carried out primarily through symbolic forms of communication. One comes to faith by dwelling in the symbolic network created by the past and present community of believers. The truth of faith becomes tacitly known by participation or conviviality within this community.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Dulles, *Craft of Theology*, 19.

¹⁰⁵ Dulles, *The Reshaping of Catholicism: Current Challenges in the Theology of Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 45.

¹⁰⁶ Dulles, “Handing on the Faith,” 295.

7. Concrete and Historical

Finally, the symbol is both a concrete, and an historical, reality. This of course is not to deny that the reality behind the “sensible sign” of the symbol is a transcendent reality, or that a symbol which arises in a particular historical epoch can continue to function symbolically far beyond its originating era. It is meant rather to emphasize that this transcendent character of the symbol must be balanced by a corresponding concreteness, if it is to function as symbol at all. It is because of their unique combination of transcendence and concreteness that “Religious symbols . . . imply something about the real order of things.”¹⁰⁷

Furthermore it must be situated in a particular historical context, at least as to its origin, if the community for which it functions is to be able to discern its meaning; it must be an element of sensible, tangible, reality – whether that is object, event, person or something else – that is sufficiently concrete to arrest the attention of the beholder, and draw that beholder into meaningful participation and contemplation.

Symbols only achieve existence so long as the reality symbolized remains transcendent and unreachable by the ordinary faculties of discernment. If that reality were to by some circumstance lose its transcendence, there would be no more need for symbol. Thus, according to Dulles, Religious symbols are not permanent or eternal. “When the Church enters into its final glory,” he clarifies, “the economy of symbols will pass away and yield to an immediate vision of the reality signified.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 66.

¹⁰⁸ Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 90.

C. Sacrament

In the introduction to this chapter, I cautioned the reader that the “foundation stones” upon which Dulles’ theology is built are often tightly interrelated, so much so in certain instances that it is not fruitful to try to isolate one entirely from the others. Dulles’ doctrine of sacrament is one such instance, as it is rarely described without reference to the church. This, of course, of itself, has something to say about the doctrines of both sacrament and church, and there will be ample opportunity to look closely at their relationship both in this chapter (“Act of the Church” in this section, and “Sign, Symbol, and Sacrament” in the next), and especially in the next chapter, concerned specifically with Dulles’ sacramental ecclesiology. For now, however, the concept of sacrament, its function and its use within Dulles’ theological system can be presented, mindful that the frequently referenced concept of the church has yet to be set forth.

While still certainly foundational, sacrament is a less central concept for Dulles’ theology as a whole than symbol. Sacramental theology as such is not a point of focus for Dulles, as is fundamental theology and ecclesiology; rather his theology of sacrament developed more as an application of a theology of symbol to the reality of the church, in service to his symbolic-realist worldview, and his enduring conviction of the sacrament’s power to reconcile conflicting ecclesiological trends.

Like symbol, which was for Dulles a narrowing of the category of sign – a special, particular type of sign – sacrament is a narrower category, or special type, of symbol. Dulles did not, however, construct his sacramental theology upon symbol as if *ex nihilo*. Classically trained during his Jesuit formation in both philosophy and

theology, Dulles had a solid grounding in the sacramental theology of the schools, of Trent, and Vatican I. He was steeped in the tradition and well prepared to receive and incorporate into his own theological thought the teachings of Vatican II on sacrament and the sacramental nature of the church. In 1986 Dulles offered the following succinct summary:

Sacrament . . . is a somewhat technical concept having four characteristics taken from sacramental theology. It means a reality founded by God in Christ, a visible sign of an invisible grace, a true embodiment of the grace that it signifies, and an efficacious transmitter of the grace signified and embodied.¹⁰⁹

These four characteristics provide a useful guide to bear in mind as the various significant elements of Dulles' theology of sacrament are presented.

1. The Sacramental Sign

Within the sign-symbol-sacrament schema which seems to characterize Dulles' approach, sacrament is clearly most closely associated with grace, and in particular, the communication of grace. This communication, however, is accomplished in some mysterious manner via the sacrament's efficacious sign. While the sacramental sign is also a symbol, when Dulles is most precise he conceives of the two signs as associated with subtly, but significantly, different realities. "The terminology of sacrament," says Dulles, "generally has reference not so much to revelation as to the communication of grace and sanctification. For the communication of revelation, symbol is perhaps a better term."¹¹⁰ While both revelation and grace can be described as a communication of God's self, revelation in Dulles' system is generally understood to be a communication of the

¹⁰⁹ Dulles, "Community of Disciples as a Model of Church," *Philosophy & Theology* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1986): 99-120 at 116.

¹¹⁰ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 158.

divine life and reality in such a way as to increase knowledge, awareness, understanding, and so on. Sacrament on the other hand is a communication of the divine life in such a way as to increase sanctification and effect salvation. An understanding of the complex reality of the sacrament – its visibility, its instrumentality, its ecclesial and communicative nature – begins with the sacramental sign.

a. Sign of Grace

Dulles makes the importance of “sign” for the sacramental reality very plain, but not without an accompanying emphasis on the particularity of the sacramental sign: “a sacrament is, in the first place, a sign of grace.”¹¹¹ This is, for Dulles a common theme, which most fundamentally distinguishes the sacramental sign from other signs, or symbols: “a sacrament is a sign of the grace which it brings about.”¹¹² It is both “a sign of present grace” and a sign of future grace, in so far as it also effects, causes, or transmits grace.¹¹³

The sacramental sign, furthermore, is distinguished from ordinary signs by its power to effect a presence of its transcendent referent. “A sign could be a mere pointer to something that is absent, but a sacrament is a ‘full sign,’ a sign of something really present,” but what is made present in the sacramental sign is grace, “hence the Council of Trent could rightly describe a sacrament as ‘the visible form of invisible grace.’”¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 66.

¹¹² Dulles, *The Dimensions of the Church*, Woodstock Papers: Occasional Essays for Theology, no. 8 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1967), 27.

¹¹³ Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, 31. Cf. Karl Rahner, S. J., “The Church and the Sacraments,” in *Studies in Modern Theology*, trans. W. J. O’Hara (London: Burns & Oates, 1963), 191-299 at 216-222.

¹¹⁴ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 66. Cf. Council of Trent, Session XIII, chapter 3.

b. Efficacious Sign

While the sacrament is clearly “in the first place a sign of grace,” Dulles is quick to balance this with an insistence that it is also a sign of profound and mysterious efficacy. “The sign itself produces or intensifies that of which it is a sign.” Not only does the sign produce, or cause the signified reality to become present to the receiver and the community, but the reality signified in fact comes into its full existence because of, and via, its expression in the sacramental sign. “Thanks to the sign, the reality signified achieves an existential depth; it emerges into solid, tangible existence.”¹¹⁵ Sacramental signs are distinguished as those which render the reality signified as “truly and efficaciously present,”¹¹⁶ and therefore, concludes Dulles, “the councils can also say that the sacraments contain the grace they signify, and confer the grace they contain.”¹¹⁷

Summarizing Vatican II’s teaching on sacrament, Dulles first notes the council’s echo of Trent’s canon – a sacrament “contains and confers the grace it signifies” – then explains what this means for the efficacy of the sacramental sign. Sacrament, according to this view, “is not a merely cognitive sign, making known something that exists without it, but an efficacious sign – one that brings about redemption.”¹¹⁸ Karl Rahner’s theology of symbol, briefly introduced in the discussion of symbol, above, can be discerned as a subtle subtext running through Dulles’ understanding of the sacramental sign’s potent efficacy. Rahner’s doctrine of *Realsymbol*, a symbol through which a transcendent

¹¹⁵ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 66.

¹¹⁶ Dulles, *Craft of Theology*, 33.

¹¹⁷ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 66. Cf. Trent, Session VII, canon 6.

¹¹⁸ Dulles, *The Reshaping of Catholicism*, 139.

reality realizes itself, or comes to “attain its own nature,” gives rise to the understanding of the sacramental sign as effecting the sacramental reality’s self-achievement.¹¹⁹

c. Instituted by Christ

The sacramental sign is not arbitrarily chosen, for as just noted it is an expression of the reality signified realizing itself in the sign. The sacramental sign is furthermore not arbitrary because it was chosen by Christ and given to the community of faith to be a particular expression of His own divine life: rebirth, forgiveness, sacrifice, communion, ministry. On Dulles’ reading, Vatican II used the term “sacrament” to refer, in part, to “a symbolic reality established by Christ.”¹²⁰ Exactly what constitutes Christological establishment has of course been the subject of great dissent since the sixteenth century, and neither the council, nor Dulles, clarifies it here, though as has just been shown, every sign that is an expression of the divine life and grace of Christ, bringing that grace to realize itself in material reality, can *ipso facto* claim a degree of Christological origin, or institution.

Dulles goes on to specify that there is a permanence to the sacramental sign’s Christological origins. In addition to its profound and mysterious efficacy, he writes, we also know, “from general sacramental theology,” that a sacrament is “permanently instituted by Christ.” By this Dulles intends to emphasize that the sacrament itself, and therefore also its sign, are meant to be “an enduring means of salvation.”¹²¹ Christ, the sacrament’s divine referent, is a living and eternal King and high priest; therefore if the

¹¹⁹ See Karl Rahner, S. J., “The Theology of the Symbol,” in *More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth, Theological Investigations 4 (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1966), 221-252 at 224-230.

¹²⁰ Dulles, *The Reshaping of Catholicism*, 139.

¹²¹ Dulles, *The Dimensions of the Church*, 51.

sacrament is to be understood as genuinely a sacrament of Christ, it must be “a symbolic reality in which Christ continues to be present and active.”¹²²

d. Expresses the Deeds of God

Like all symbols, it is of the nature of sacrament to express the reality to which it points, as has just been considered. The sacrament, however, is distinguished from other symbols by the divine nature of the reality expressed. Because the sacrament is connected with (and owes its origins to) God, as the last section clarified, it becomes itself a part of sacred reality. Furthermore this sacred reality “is thereafter looked upon as a sign which expresses and calls to mind what God has done.”¹²³ The sacrament is a present, ongoing expression and manifestation of a particular, Christological grace, but is also a symbol which makes present to the mind and to the community God’s mighty deeds by which it has come to be. There is, then, an anamnetic character to sacrament that makes these deeds present for the community of faith, and invites the community to active, ongoing participation. The sacramental signs are “intended to remind Christians of what God is doing and wills to have done throughout the world.”¹²⁴

2. Instrument of Grace

Sacraments, it may be said again, are in the first place signs of grace. But they remain mere signs or simple pointers and do not attain to the level of sacrament unless they are also, simultaneously, instruments of grace. The two descriptors go hand-in-hand, and are often used as a sort of theological short-hand for the technical concept of

¹²² Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 270.

¹²³ Dulles, *The Dimensions of the Church*, 71.

¹²⁴ Dulles, *The Reshaping of Catholicism*, 141.

sacrament. Vatican II, for example, commonly used this phrase to indicate the sacramentality of the church. Dulles notes that in the council's Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, "The Church was called a sacrament, in the technical sense of a divinely established 'sign and instrument' that really contains the grace it confers."¹²⁵ In a somewhat stronger passage, he echoes this observation, "As understood by the council, any sacrament is by its very nature both sign and instrument of grace."¹²⁶

Furthermore, as symbol, the sacrament exhibits many of the characteristics described above as elements of symbolic reality: "Sacrament may be seen as a manifestation of mystery, as a source of communion, and as an instrument of transformation."¹²⁷

a. Means of Grace

Thus sacraments have a complex relationship to grace: "Under one aspect the sacraments are effects of grace," Dulles writes, "since they express it, but under another aspect they cause grace, rendering it really present under symbolic forms."¹²⁸ In this, causal, sense the sacraments are properly understood as "means of grace," though Dulles quickly cautions that this must be understood within a larger context of God's gracious acts, so that God does not end up forced to constrain his salvific power and will to sacramental acts. Too much stress on the sacraments as means of grace can tend to obscure, for example, the salvific power of the Word of God;¹²⁹ too little appreciation for the sacraments as not only signs but also means (instruments) of grace, on the other hand,

¹²⁵ Dulles, "Imaging the Church for the 1980's," *Thought* 56, no. 221 (June 1981): 121-138 at 125. Cf. *Lumen Gentium* 1.

¹²⁶ Dulles, *The Reshaping of Catholicism*, 142.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹²⁸ Dulles, *Craft of Theology*, 33.

¹²⁹ Dulles, *Revelation and the Quest for Unity* (Washington, DC: Corpus Books, 1968), 48.

strips the sacraments of their efficacy and reduces them to the level of sacred signs or pious acts.

b. Transmitter of Grace

Another way of understanding the instrumentality of sacrament is via the concept of transmission. Dulles uses the terms “transmitter” and “cause” nearly synonymously in his description of sacramental efficacy, claiming the sacrament is both “a sign of present grace and a symbolic cause or transmitter of grace.”¹³⁰ Transmission of grace to my mind is a somewhat stronger notion, indicating that grace is not only brought into existence – in general – but is also, through the instrumentality of the sacrament, brought to reception in the soul of the participant.

Not only is the transmission of grace effected on an individual level, but also on the level of the community of faith. Dulles hints at such an understanding when he applies the Tridentine definition of sacrament to the church, describing it corporately as the “visible bearer of the invisible grace of God.”¹³¹ As sacrament, “it signifies, embodies, and carries on the saving work of Christ, who is himself the original sacrament of God.”¹³² Bearing the grace of God to the world, and making it present to all people through the ministry of the church is a clear instance of the transmission of grace via sacramental instrumentality.

¹³⁰ Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, 31.

¹³¹ Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 111.

¹³² Dulles, “Community of Disciples as a Model of Church,” 116.

c. Occasion of Grace

Recognizing once more the nature of sacrament in Dulles' theology as a special type of symbol, it follows that for Dulles sacraments must be more than rituals that work externally on the recipient. Like symbols, sacraments are not objects, but events. They are, according to Dulles, "not mere things, but occasions of grace, richly blessed by the Lord's promise to come into the midst of those who gather in his name (Mt 18:20)."¹³³ As symbols, sacraments are evocative, participative, and seek to draw the recipient into the world created by their symbolic expression. In this reception of the sacrament, the recipient encounters the living God, and the rite itself becomes an instrumental cause, and occasion, of grace.

3. Channel of Faith

A final element of the sacrament's instrumentality is its character as what Dulles terms a "channel of faith." Sacraments are channels of faith, he writes, because "they serve to nourish and strengthen the supernatural convictions of those who devoutly receive them."¹³⁴ Again it is clear that what Dulles holds to be true of symbol – in this case its power to "strengthen convictions" – is also true of sacrament. The clear emphasis to this point has been on the sacrament's relationship to grace, as sign and instrument, rather than to faith. Grace precedes faith in some instances – for example, the grace of conversion that gives birth to the believer's "supernatural convictions" when they do not yet exist. In other instances, as Dulles suggests here, grace presupposes faith. Though the relationship is always initiated by grace, once grace has been given and

¹³³ Dulles, "Imaging the Church," 135.

¹³⁴ Dulles, *Revelation and the Quest for Unity*, 114.

responded to in faith, faith can lead to further grace (for example, the worthy reception of the sacraments), which in turn strengthens and increases faith. It is a relationship of mutual dependence, but always initiated by the gracious outreach of God.

4. Symbolic Reality

It is by now well established that within Dulles' system 'sacrament' is a special class of symbolic reality. He contends that this is also what was envisioned by Vatican II, when it applied the term 'sacrament' to the church: "By a sacrament the council evidently means a symbolic reality."¹³⁵ Concerning the sacramental effect of the transmission of grace, mentioned above, Dulles clarifies that it is specifically symbolic: sacrament is "a symbolic cause or transmitter of grace."¹³⁶ In claiming that the transmission of grace is symbolic, Dulles does not intend to suggest that it is anything less than real, and powerful – rather, that the sacraments cause or transmit grace by "rendering it really present under symbolic forms."¹³⁷ The material form of the sacrament is symbol, therefore the grace brought about through reception of the sacrament is given according to the mode of the symbol.

Furthermore, the sacrament has both an individual and a communal aspect to its symbolic nature. According to Dulles, a sacrament is "a socially constituted or communal symbol of the presence of grace coming to fulfillment."¹³⁸ As a symbolic reality, sacrament exhibits efficacy for the individual receiver only because the community has first received and recognized it as a symbolic expression of the divine.

¹³⁵ Dulles, *The Reshaping of Catholicism*, 139.

¹³⁶ Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, 31.

¹³⁷ Dulles, *Craft of Theology*, 33.

¹³⁸ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 67.

5. Act of the Church

Dulles emphasizes that “As understood in the Christian tradition, sacraments are never merely individual transactions.”¹³⁹ His doctrine of the sacramental symbol’s “socially constituted or communal” nature leads to an appreciation of sacramental acts in general as “acts of the Church, [whereby] the Christian is brought into a personal and transforming contact with the God who stands above and beyond all that the Church can clearly say of him.”¹⁴⁰ Drawing on the work of Henri de Lubac, Dulles emphasizes the close and necessary association of the sacrament’s very heart – its power to confer grace – to the church: “the sacraments are sources of grace precisely because and in so far as they draw their recipients into a new or closer union with the Church. All sacraments are, in the first instance, sacraments of the Church.”¹⁴¹ This is true in a particularly profound, and perhaps most obvious, way in the Eucharist – the great sacrament of unity. The teaching, however, extends well beyond the Eucharist: “all the sacraments – and not simply the Eucharist,” says Dulles, “have an ecclesial aspect. They assimilate believers to the People of God and give them specific roles and functions within the Body of Christ.”¹⁴²

Thus in addition to the personally transformative nature of sacrament, given and received within the community, there is also for Dulles a structural sense in which to understand the sacraments as acts “of the church.” The sacraments are “the visible means

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, 47.

¹⁴¹ Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 113.

¹⁴² Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, 158.

whereby the Church organically structures itself as the body of Christ.”¹⁴³ This can be seen in the sacrament of Holy Orders, of course, which effects a formal, hierarchical ecclesial structure, but beyond this “Each of the sacraments is a particular actualization of the Church’s essence and gives an ecclesial grace specific to itself.”¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, “Every sacrament binds the individual in new ways to the Church, which is the great sacrament.”¹⁴⁵ The sacraments realize their structural effect by giving believers “specific roles and functions within the body of Christ,” endowing them with the grace necessary for their particular function.

Sacraments furthermore exhibit an ecclesial nature in so far as they demand engagement and participation, both by the individual recipient and by the community. Dulles summarizes Vatican II (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* and *Lumen Gentium*) to this effect: “sacraments are sacred actions performed in a worshipping community and calling for full and active participation. No sacrament achieves its transformative impact when taken simply as a spectacle.”¹⁴⁶ Sacraments, as symbols, yield their grace through participation in the ecclesial community.

6. Expression of Spiritual Reality

The particularity of the sacrament within the category of symbol has been suggested at various points in the discussion thus far; it is now necessary to consider that distinction with greater precision. The essence of the distinction between a secular symbol such as a national flag, a religious symbol such as the cross, and a sacramental

¹⁴³ Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 113.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁴⁵ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 220.

¹⁴⁶ Dulles, *The Reshaping of Catholicism*, 125.

symbol such as the actions, words, and material (water) of baptism, is in the reality that stands behind the symbol, coming to expression and self-realization through the symbol.

The reality behind the symbol dictates both the existence of the symbol, and its nature. As Dulles says, a sacramental sign (more properly, symbol) “comes into being because of the spiritual reality that is contained in it.”¹⁴⁷ Though the reality behind any symbol is necessarily a transcendent reality, the reality expressed by the sacramental symbol, Christ Himself, is qualitatively different. It is this reality that is made present, symbolically but powerfully, in the sacrament. For this reason we can speak of the sacrament as an expression of spiritual reality in a manner that far exceeds other symbols – even religious symbols. This expression takes the form of a presence, within the community and the individual recipient: “The concept of sacrament in Catholic theology involves not only signification but also the dynamic presence of the reality signified.”¹⁴⁸ As symbol, the sacrament involves an element of material reality, which because of its function, symbolically and sacramentally, within the community, “communicates the real presence and power of a spiritual reality – the grace of Jesus Christ in the particular form signified by the sacrament in question.”¹⁴⁹

7. Word, Communication, Revelation

Sacrament is also, according to Dulles, an instrument of communication. The sacrament’s nature as “expression” of the divine reality which it signifies has been emphasized thus far to the exclusion of that expression’s communicative character. In considering the sacrament’s powers of communication, however, Dulles draws out some

¹⁴⁷ Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, 49.

¹⁴⁸ Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 111.

¹⁴⁹ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 158.

further insights into the reality being expressed. In the sense thus far considered, the reality expressed by the sacramental symbol is the grace of Christ, or Christ Himself in accordance with the sacrament's particular form. There is a further sense, Dulles claims, in which the reality expressed is understood in more revelatory terms: "broadly speaking, a sacrament can itself be called a word, in the sense that it is a sign expressing the mind and intention of God who is at work in it."¹⁵⁰ The "mind and intention of God" is a notable shift from grace toward knowledge, awareness or understanding – in other words, toward revelatory language. Indeed, Dulles claims, "When the Holy Spirit is pleased to speak through the ministry of the Church, the preached word and the sacraments become bearers of revelation."¹⁵¹

Dulles gives two reasons for attributing to sacrament this character of word (specifically the Word of God), divine communication, and revelation. First, because symbols have the power to work on both the affective and cognitive faculties, and furthermore the power to evoke – to bring to conscious awareness what was previously unrealized – such "symbolic actions, including sacraments, are forms of testimony."¹⁵² By a rather mysterious process the testimony is evoked from within, and yet expresses the mind and intention of God, giving the testimony a certain revelatory aspect. Second, given that the sacraments are efficacious signs, effecting that which they symbolize, and that the sacramental sign is comprised of both words and actions, "the sacraments

¹⁵⁰ Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 112.

¹⁵¹ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 92.

¹⁵² Dulles, "Handing on the Faith," 302.

themselves are instances of Christian proclamation, for in them the word achieves its fullest efficacy.”¹⁵³

8. Sanctifying and Salvific

Finally, there is an aspect to Dulles’ theology of sacrament that may be considered sufficiently evident without special mention – the inherent holiness of the sacrament and its power to sanctify. While perhaps obvious to some, this sacramental character is worth mentioning here as it will become significant later on when the concept of sacrament is applied to the church and the resulting ecclesial sacrament is examined more closely.

“All the sacraments are holy,” Dulles insists, “and have power to sanctify, but the Eucharist is ‘most holy’.”¹⁵⁴ The power to sanctify is particularly strong in the Eucharist, as the real presence it effects is holy by its own nature (body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ) and must therefore drive out all evil. However, all sacraments must in their own way be holy, for all sacraments are expressions in particular symbolic forms of the grace of Christ. This grace is by nature holy and the sign is by nature efficacious; thus in so far as the recipient is disposed to receive the sacramental grace it is necessarily sanctifying. Dulles once again draws upon Vatican II in support of his claim: “As understood by the council, any sacrament is by its very nature both sign and instrument of grace, and the worthy reception of the sacrament is a source of sanctification.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Dulles, *Craft of Theology*, 34. Cf. Rahner, “The Word and the Eucharist,” in *Theological Investigations IV: More Recent Writings*, trans. Smyth (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1966), 253-286 at 253-268.

¹⁵⁴ Dulles, “A Eucharistic Church: The Vision of John Paul II,” *America* 191, no. 20 (Dec 20-27 2004): 8-12 at 9.

¹⁵⁵ Dulles, *The Reshaping of Catholicism*, 142.

D. Church

Though Dulles himself would most likely have identified his principal interest and scholarly focus with the questions and issues of fundamental theology – revelation theology in particular – in the minds of many he is more closely associated with his ecclesiological work. As a convert to Catholicism, and an active ecumenist for most of his career, Dulles had much to contribute to an understanding of the church in both Protestant and Roman Catholic perspectives. His *Models of the Church*, an attempt to overcome deeply held ecclesiological divergences, was, by his own estimation, among the “most commercially successful of [his] books,” remaining relevant and popular today.

Yet in his thought and writings, it is apparent that Dulles approached ecclesiology from deep within the worlds of revelation theology and symbol. His understanding of the church is strongly influenced by its relationship to both of those similarly complex and foundational concepts. Likewise Vatican II, opening while Dulles was in Rome completing his theological education, was a profound and enduring influence. He eagerly embraced the council’s teachings on the communal and sacramental character of the church, which became central features of his own ecclesiology.

Like the concepts of revelation, symbol and sacrament before it, the concept of church operative in Dulles’ theology is multi-faceted and complex. An adequate understanding of its function and use in his theology cannot be limited to any one – or few – attributes. It is, like revelation, symbol, and sacrament, steeped in mystery.

1. Mystery

Dulles had no hesitation in presenting the nature of the church as not only mystery, but divine mystery – a partaker in the mystery of God. He embraced the explanation from Pope Paul VI’s speech opening the second session of Vatican II: “The Church is a mystery. It is a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God.”¹⁵⁶ In fact, Dulles discerned “something of a consensus” in the early 1970s “that at the heart of the Church one finds mystery,” but the consensus of which Dulles speaks further holds that, “the innermost reality of the Church – the most important constituent of its being – is the divine self-gift.”¹⁵⁷ Dulles’ ecclesiology, taken as a whole does not fall prey to a divinization of the church. Other passages that will be presented in due course prevent such an understanding. Here, however, he is insistent upon the church’s character as a divine mystery, a community which draws its life from the grace (self-gift) of God. “Theologically,” he concludes, “the term ‘church’ refers to the mystery of Christ as realized in the community of those who believe in him and are assembled in his name.”¹⁵⁸

There are certain implications of an understanding of the church as being, in its innermost reality, a mystery: As mystery, the church “is not fully intelligible to the finite mind of man . . . the reason for this lack of intelligibility is not the poverty but the richness of the Church itself.” Like symbol, the mystery of the church is a reality characterized by a plenitude or overabundance of meaning, far beyond the capacity of finite minds to receive. One cannot step outside the church and comprehend it as though

¹⁵⁶ Dulles, *The Dimensions of the Church*, 6.

¹⁵⁷ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 17.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

it were an external object, “because we are involved in it; we know it through a kind of intersubjectivity.”¹⁵⁹

“The mysterious character of the Church has important implications for methodology,” as well, continues Dulles. “It rules out the possibility of proceeding from clear and univocal concepts, or from definitions in the usual sense of the word.”¹⁶⁰ Instead of concepts, therefore, Dulles turns to “images” as a tool to “illuminate the mysteries” of the church. *Models of the Church* was born of this understanding, as Dulles recalls “Father Weigel had convinced me that the Church as a mystery could not be contained under any conceptual definition. Rather, it should be designated by a variety of images and metaphors, each of which captured certain limited aspects of the complex reality.”¹⁶¹ In *Models* Dulles sought to do just that – filtering the limited aspects of the church’s mystery ‘captured’ in the various images proposed by contemporary ecclesiological schools, in order to construct a greater understanding of the full reality.

2. Multi-Dimensional Reality

One of Dulles’ more distinctive contributions to ecclesiology came in 1967, in a book entitled *The Dimensions of the Church*. Chapter one of this work describes the church under the rubric of four “dimensions” – Length, Width, Breadth, Height.¹⁶² By height, Dulles meant that by which the church shares in the divine life. The church is, in this dimension, an intimate union of the human with the divine. Dulles uses this dimension to emphasize the ecclesial reality as a spiritual community of grace – Christ’s

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 17.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 18.

¹⁶¹ Dulles, *A Testimonial to Grace*, 118.

¹⁶² Dulles, *A Testimonial to Grace*, 118.

mystical body animated by the Holy Spirit.¹⁶³ The depth of the church indicates that by which the church shares in the brokenness and sinfulness of its members; it references the misery of the church on Earth, balancing out the splendor of the church in heaven.

According to this dimension the church is “an assemblage of [persons] who always fall short of what God requires of them, and who therefore need forgiveness.”¹⁶⁴ The dimension of ‘width,’ is the church’s catholic, or universal dimension – the dimension that incorporates the possibility of universal salvation. According to this dimension, “we must speak of two distinct ways in which the Church can be present and active. On the one hand, there is an institutional presence of the Church in historical continuity with the ministry of Christ its Founder. . . . short of this, there is an active presence of the Church even among those who have not yet been confronted with the forms of creed and cult historically deriving from Jesus Christ.”¹⁶⁵ Finally, the ‘length’ of the church is a reference to its temporal endurance. Dulles notes that Vatican II, “firmly teaches that the Church will fully achieve itself in heaven,” therefore, continues Dulles, “we should look upon the Church, above all else, as the communion of saints with one another and, through Christ, with God.”¹⁶⁶

3. Community

In certain passages, Dulles presents his conviction of the communal nature of the church simply and forcefully, for example, “The Church is a union or communion of men

¹⁶³ Ibid., 9.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 18.

with one another through the grace of Christ.”¹⁶⁷ Other passages focus on particular elements of this communal reality. It is, for example, a community that draws upon its symbolic character as an aid to its evangelistic mission: “The Church, as a ‘sign raised up among the nations,’ is the community of those who have been drawn, and who wish to draw others, into Christ’s own way of life.”¹⁶⁸ It is both a community characterized by divine grace, as has been said, and yet decidedly human. Dulles clarifies that “in spite of the assistance of the Holy Spirit,” and although according to Vatican II it is “by no weak analogy . . . compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word,” nonetheless “the Church, as a human community, is not, in the strict sense, a continued Incarnation of the Word, nor is it, properly speaking, an Incarnation of the Holy Spirit. It is a group of graced but humanly limited, often sinful, men and women like ourselves.”¹⁶⁹ Furthermore, the community of the church is a sociological as well as theological reality: “Sociologically, the term ‘church’ would designate any group of men who consider themselves to be, and are considered to be, followers of Christ. Theologically the term ‘church’ refers to the mystery of Christ as realized in the community of those who believe in him and are assembled in his name.”¹⁷⁰

In 1986, Dulles devoted an article to an exploration of a particular view of the church’s communal character. Based on “a passing remark,” in Pope John Paul II’s encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, in which he described the church as a “community of disciples,” Dulles found this to be a worthy addition to the ecclesial models he identified

¹⁶⁷ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 17.

¹⁶⁸ Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 61. Cf. Vatican I, *Dei Filius* 3.

¹⁶⁹ Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 103. Cf. *Lumen Gentium* 8.

¹⁷⁰ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 123.

in *Models of the Church*.¹⁷¹ A year later, in 1987, the revised edition of *Models of the Church* was published, with an additional chapter on the church as “community of disciples.” Dulles was drawn to this particular take on the communal character of the church for several reasons. First, “it calls attention to the ongoing relationship of the Church to Christ, its Lord, who continues to direct it through his Spirit;” secondly, it has a strong basis in both Scripture and Tradition; and finally, Dulles finds it to be a “broadly inclusive” model, with potential for “building bridges” to the other models and therefore serving as the basis for a “comprehensive” ecclesiology.¹⁷² Dulles did not go on to develop such a comprehensive ecclesiology based on this model, but, along with the sacramental model, embraced it as most capable of serving in that capacity.

4. Authoritative Interpreter

Dulles recognized that there are many means by which God communicates to His children, among them those that have been presented here – religious symbols, sacraments, and especially revelation. In each of these cases, however, Dulles also insists that there must be an interpretation before there can be an actual communication, let alone a divine revelation. Not only that, but the reliability of the communication is dependent upon the reliability of the interpretation. In the absence of an inspired interpretation, the resulting communication is subject to human error. For Dulles, this inspired, and thereby authoritative, interpretation is supplied by the church. The church has developed “methods of effectively differentiating between truth and error,” Dulles claims, “through its grasp of the total symbolic system, through its long experience of the

¹⁷¹ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (March 4, 1979), no. 21.

¹⁷² Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 206-207.

Christian life, through its scholarly disciplines, its ecclesiastical structures, and the ongoing assistance of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷³ For this reason “Christ committed his message not simply to individuals but, first of all, to the Church, the community of faith.”

Revelation is given to the church to protect and transmit, faithfully and without error, and thus “it is the whole church today that guards and transmits the apostolic teaching.”¹⁷⁴

5. Mediator

The mediatorial role of symbol in Dulles’ theology is well known, and there will be occasion to examine that closely in chapter three. Less well known is the manner in which the church, for Dulles, also fills a mediatorial role. Specifically, he writes, “we understand the Church as expression and mediator of God’s gift in Jesus Christ.” While “the essential reality of the Church is indeed a matter of revealed truth,” the church still must adapt to changing contexts, cultures and needs of its members and of the world. “It must be responsive to the demands of the times, for it has to signify and mediate God’s grace to different groups of people, in accordance with their particular gifts, needs, and capacities.”¹⁷⁵ The mediation of the church is therefore, in this view, a translation of sorts – an offer of the gift of divine grace, given to the church in Christ, to all nations and peoples of the world in a manner they are capable of receiving it.

Dulles is careful to point out however, that the church, as mediator, is not an intermediate step between God and humanity. “She does not present herself as a third party, interposing herself between the faithful and their Lord, but as a bridge or meeting

¹⁷³ Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 67.

¹⁷⁴ Dulles, “Handing on the Faith,” 299.

¹⁷⁵ Dulles, “Imaging the Church,” 121.

ground.” The church is a mediator because “she participates in the extremes which she unites.”¹⁷⁶

6. Sign, Symbol and Sacrament

For Dulles the church can be described, according to its various functions and capacities, by all three of these concentric realities: sign, symbol, and sacrament. Because the church is not strictly an invisible reality – as is sometimes claimed, stemming from the Reformation debates¹⁷⁷ – it is always a sign of some kind. It is not always, however, a “full sign,” nor does it even always indicate accurately the reality signified. According to Dulles, “it goes without saying that the Church is never a perfect sign. Made up of human beings who are frail and sinful, it is to some extent a countersign. In its historical and empirical realization, it always falls short of the divine idea of what it ought to be.”¹⁷⁸ The church is most fully realized as sign, he continues, “when its members are evidently united to one another and to God through holiness and mutual love, and when they visibly gather to confess their faith in Christ and to celebrate what God has done for them in Christ.”¹⁷⁹

The church is therefore a sign, an indicator to all of the enduring presence of Christ in the world and God’s love for the world. It is a visible community that one can point to, examine, participate in and experience. But it is also an efficacious sign, “an effective sign of Christ in the world,” that “elicits and deepens the faith of its own

¹⁷⁶ Dulles, *Revelation and the Quest for Unity*, 114.

¹⁷⁷ Dulles devotes an article to this subject early on, as a aid to Catholic priests for understanding the differences between Protestant and Catholic conceptions of church. See Dulles, “The Protestant Concept of the Church,” *The American Ecclesiastical Review* 132 (January - June 1955): 330-335.

¹⁷⁸ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 219.

¹⁷⁹ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 68.

members.”¹⁸⁰ As a sign that is effective, evocative and transformative, it is most certainly a symbolic reality. The symbolic reality of the church, like its sign, takes various forms in Dulles’ thought. It is “a symbolic embodiment of the Kingdom;”¹⁸¹ a symbol of Christ, pointing to and actualizing “what God tells us through his Son;”¹⁸² and it is a “real symbol,” with reference to Rahner again, “charged with the power of the divine life within her.”¹⁸³ The symbolic nature of the church allows its members to encounter and experience something of the reality of God, particularly in the Incarnate Son. “The Church reveals God not so much by what it says about him as by what it is.”¹⁸⁴

Furthermore, the church is, in various ways, understood as a sacrament. This will be the focus of chapter two, below, so it needs only a brief introduction, but as a pervasive theme in Dulles’ thought, it must be included, at least in outline, in this survey of his ecclesiology. “By very definition,” he insists, “the Church is, under Christ, the universal sacrament of salvation or, in other words, the sacrament of Christ in the world.”¹⁸⁵ The church is sacrament, in part, because it is an expression of the grace of Christ, who is himself the “fundamental sacrament.” The church shares in the sacramentality of Christ by, as Vatican II has said, no small analogy: “The Church, analogously, is a sacrament or symbolic reality which prolongs in time and space the event of God’s merciful approach in Jesus.”¹⁸⁶ Thus, though the church shares in the

¹⁸⁰ Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, 41.

¹⁸¹ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 115.

¹⁸² Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 219.

¹⁸³ Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 168.

¹⁸⁴ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 219.

¹⁸⁵ Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, 94.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 30. Cf. Rahner, *Theology of Pastoral Action*, trans. W. J. O’Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 70-71.

sacramentality of Christ it does so only analogously – it is a distinct mode of sacramental expression. It may be called a sacrament, according to Dulles, in so far as it is founded by Christ, signifies Christ, embodies Christ and carries on his salvific work.¹⁸⁷

The church, finally, is the sacrament of revelation. For Dulles, revelation is an event, both an offer and reception of the divine self-communication. The church is essential to that revelatory event, for revelation as a communication from God to humanity requires a community of faith which will receive and accept it as revelation.¹⁸⁸ That community, for Dulles, is the church.

Through the sacrament of the church, writes Dulles, “God intimates his presence and invites us to enter into a transformed life.”¹⁸⁹ That transformation is not complete, until it is realized at the parousia, but “In spite of the sinfulness and fallibility of its members, taken as individuals, we may rest assured that the Church itself will continue to be, albeit imperfectly, a sacrament or symbolic presence of Christ.”¹⁹⁰

7. Object of Faith, Subject of Faith

Dulles is aware of the difficulties associated with calling the church the “object of faith,” as if it is on an equal plane with the divine realities in which Christian’s place their faith. However, he cannot deny that there is an aspect of the church that renders it more than just the subject of faith. “The Church’s relation to the faith of her members is complex,” he admits, “even paradoxical.”¹⁹¹ The paradox does not, however, prevent it from fulfilling the roles of both object and subject of faith. For Dulles, this is possible

¹⁸⁷ Dulles, “Community of Disciples as a Model of Church,” 116.

¹⁸⁸ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 219-220.

¹⁸⁹ Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, 48.

¹⁹⁰ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 221.

¹⁹¹ Dulles, *Revelation and the Quest for Unity*, 114.

because of the church's mediatory function. The church functions as bridge between the divine and human, as a meeting ground where the infinite and finite interact. The church is both object and subject of faith, Dulles writes, because it shares in the functions of both Redeemer and the redeemed, both believer and believed. In an eloquent passage Dulles presents the paradoxical reality that gives credence to his claim:

She [the church] can call for faith in her word, and yet tell men to believe in God alone. She can point to herself as a manifest sign and yet declare that she is a mystery hidden in God. She implores the Lord for the grace of faith, and sacramentally imparts the grace which she petitions. . . .The Church, through her prayers and sacramental action, receives and bestows the grace whereby she infallibly heralds, and herself indefectibly believes, on her own assurance, confirmed by the sign of her own vitality, that she herself is the very people of God, redeemed and sanctified by the most precious Blood of His only begotten Son.¹⁹²

Significantly however, Dulles is careful to clarify that one does not believe in the church as one believes in God. “The Church, for the believer, is not so much an object believed as an extension of the believing subject. . . .Through faith and sacramental incorporation, the faithful are taken up into the church – that community which Scripture and theology designate by the term ‘body of Christ.’¹⁹³

8. Expression of Grace

Echoing once more the Rahnerian ontology of grace, Dulles contends that the church is the visible, social expression of the grace of Christ by which that grace is fully realized. “Wherever the grace of Christ is present,” he writes, “it is in search of a visible form that adequately expresses what it is,”¹⁹⁴ therefore, “the Church and grace are

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, 44.

¹⁹⁴ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 71.

essentially connected.”¹⁹⁵ Grace does not “fully achieve itself,” according to Dulles, unless and until it achieves self-expression “in a palpable and social form.” The church for Dulles is that visible, social form through which the grace of Christ finds its self-expression. “The church, as a visible entity, comes into being at the point where believers in community recognize themselves as recipients of God’s gift in Christ.” In this sense, “grace itself has an incarnational structure.”¹⁹⁶

Unfortunately the grace of Christ does not always find in the church a fully suitable form of expression. Through the sins and failings of its members the church can hinder somewhat the expression of grace by which it is, itself, realized, for “the Church becomes Church insofar as the grace of Christ, operative within it, achieves historical tangibility through the actions of the Church as such.”¹⁹⁷ These actions can either facilitate or limit the “historical tangibility” of the grace of Christ, and thereby hinder or support the church’s own realization.

9. Analogy of the Incarnation

It is one thing to say that grace has an incarnational structure, and therefore the church is the palpable, social expression of grace. It is another thing altogether to claim that the church has an incarnational structure. As Dulles notes, “the similarity between the Church and the Incarnation is real, but the differences must not be overlooked. In the Incarnation the human element is not a pre-existing person, but the assumed nature, and the personality is that of the divine Word.”¹⁹⁸ Vatican II did not claim an incarnational

¹⁹⁵ Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 111-112.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁹⁷ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 69.

¹⁹⁸ Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 44.

structure for the church, and neither did Dulles, but recognizing in the church a striking similarity to the Incarnate Christ, both with divine and human elements in a mysterious unity, the council did specifically address the relationship. Dulles summarizes its teaching in *Lumen Gentium* 8: “The Church, it declared, comprises a divine and a human element, and for this reason, by an excellent analogy, may be compared to the mystery of the Incarnation.”

The introduction of analogy into the relationship makes it possible to simultaneously uphold the similarities and important differences between the two realities. Dulles continues, “the council went on to say that in Christ, the assumed nature is united to the divine Word, whereas in the Church the visible society is vivified by the Holy Spirit. Thus we have a proportionality consisting of four terms: the human nature of Christ is to the divine Word analogously what the Church as a human society is to the Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit is not incarnate in the church, indeed is not capable of incarnation; rather “He who sanctified Jesus in his humanity inhabits and sanctifies the members of Christ, drawing them into union with one another.”¹⁹⁹

10. Human, Visible Institution

It has already been noted that for Dulles, the church is sign, symbol and sacrament. Early in his career, Dulles looked in some detail at the differences between Protestant and Roman Catholic conceptions of church. His article was intended primarily for Catholic priests, as an aid to understanding the dichotomy claimed by Protestants between a “visible church” and an “invisible church.”²⁰⁰ Dulles rejected the notion on

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 45.

²⁰⁰ Dulles, “The Protestant Concept of the Church.”

two levels: first, he did not accept the dichotomy as legitimate, aligning himself firmly with the traditional Catholic position of one church comprised of both human (visible) and divine (invisible) elements; second, he insisted upon both the benefits and the necessity of the visible elements of the church.

In *Models of the Church* Dulles develops this appraisal of the visible elements of the church further, under the rubric of the “institutional model” of the church. He does not shy away from the criticisms launched against the institutional, hierarchical view of the church in the wake of Vatican II, in fact he is himself highly critical of it in its more extreme forms.²⁰¹ However, he also does not join in a wholesale rejection of the institutional model. On the contrary, Dulles upholds the visible, hierarchical, and institutional elements as essential to the church’s reality. Without these elements there could be no consideration of a sacramental church (for there would be no sign); there could be no talk of the church as an analogy to the incarnation; there could be no real historical continuity or corporate identity.

More importantly, Dulles differentiates between an institutional church, and a church characterized by institutionalism.²⁰² In the former, “The organization of the Church need not be pitted against its spirit and its life.” Rather, the organization of the church is necessary to its function, to its mission, and to its ministry, and the visible structures and institutions (including the institution of the hierarchical church government) are necessary to the organization. “According to the logic of the incarnation,” he argues, “the Church will seek always to strengthen its life by appropriate

²⁰¹ For a brief overview of Dulles’ critique of the institutional model, see the summary of ‘assets’ and ‘liabilities’ in *Models of the Church*, 42-46.

²⁰² See *Ibid*, 34-35.

visible structures. The church will not be an invisible ‘Kingdom of the Spirit,’ but a human institution, similar in many respects to other societies.”²⁰³

11. Recipient of Revelation

Finally, having used an as-yet undefined concept of church in describing Dulles’ theology of revelation in this chapter’s opening section, we now come full circle – returning to the concept of revelation, this time in service to a description of the church. In chapter IV, below, I examine the principally unspoken relationship of church to revelation within Dulles’ thought and writings; here it is sufficient to limit consideration to Dulles’ explicit teachings on the church, rather than its individual members, as the primary recipient of the revelation given in Christ.

He argues that “the Church is the community to which Christ delivered his revelation.”²⁰⁴ Like the chosen people, Israel, God’s covenant is with the people. His Word and His salvation come to the community of believers, and through the community to its individual members. Dulles continues, “Christ committed his message not simply to individuals but, first of all, to the Church, the community of faith. And it is the whole church today that guards and transmits the apostolic teaching.”²⁰⁵ Dulles does not deny that God speaks the word of revelation to individuals, only that this is the primary form of revelation or that the individual receives it without recourse to the instrumentality of the church. The individual does not receive the revelation of God from the church as if it were an external gift handed out, such as alms; revelation comes to the individual through

²⁰³ Ibid, 197.

²⁰⁴ Dulles, “Handing on the Faith,” 302.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 299.

his or her participation in the life, worship, ministry, and symbolic world of the church. As part of the church, the individual receives what the church receives.

Furthermore, “the Church claims to be the bearer of a message of salvation that would never have entered the minds of the wisest sages of paganism. Paul calls it “a secret and hidden wisdom of God,” far beyond the dreams of all the rulers of this age (I Cor 2:7-8).”²⁰⁶ The church exercises this function in order to bring the revelation of God to the widest possible audience. It does not wish or attempt to keep this “secret and hidden wisdom of God” either secret or hidden. Rather, it works to proclaim it to all who would hear: “The Church is an instrument through which God makes his word resound, and the bishop or priest is one in whom the God-given testimony of the Church becomes publicly accessible.”²⁰⁷

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Of the four foundation stones presented in this chapter, the concept of ‘church’ as it functions in Dulles’ theology has proven to be the most complex. That is, I suppose, rather to be expected and appropriate. Ecclesial issues were the topic of the greatest part of Dulles writings, and even when they were not the explicit subject matter they were seldom absent from the unspoken subtext. Dulles made a conscious effort, not only in his formal study, *Models of the Church*, but throughout his writings, to construct a full and rich understanding of the ecclesial reality. He approached and attempted to understand the church in as many of its functions and facets as possible, and from as many different viewpoints as possible, constantly aware that, as his mentor Fr. Weigel had convinced him, the church is a mystery that cannot be contained under any conceptual definition.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 298.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has made no attempt at a comprehensive definition of the four foundational concepts upon which Dulles built so much of his theology. Rather, by enumerating the various properties, functions, images and applications of the concepts in Dulles' published writings, this chapter has attempted to present a relatively thorough picture of how these concepts function within his larger theological system.

In the chapters that follow, these four concepts will become two, as Dulles himself has used them, and then, eventually, one, as I attempt to coax from Dulles' writings the idea within them that is "struggling to be born." As the concepts are brought into conversation with each other and become elements of increasingly complex theological constructs, it will be helpful to recall their more basic characteristics as depicted here. Although it has proven impossible to describe the concepts in this chapter in isolation, the concepts as they have been presented are, at least, in their most basic form.

Thus armed with conceptual maps of church and sacrament, we turn now to a close examination of the origin, nature, significance, and critiques of Dulles' sacramental ecclesiology.

CHAPTER II:

ECCLESIOLOGY OF AVERY DULLES: THE CHURCH AS SACRAMENT

A. Introduction

The previous chapter set forth the nature of ‘sacrament’ as understood in the Roman Catholic Tradition, and specifically in Dulles’ theology, as a particularly potent type of symbol. In developing his distinction between sign, symbol and sacrament – a distinction that figures prominently in his theology of revelation, of sacraments, and of the church – Dulles takes pains to emphasize those qualities which the Catholic tradition ascribes, and reserves, to that which is properly referred to as ‘sacrament.’²⁰⁸ Though sacraments do indeed possess the character of both sign and symbol, the sacrament goes beyond both. It is an active and efficacious symbol not merely pointing toward or representing divine grace, but participating actively in making such grace present in the life and soul of the believer. It accomplishes what is signified by drawing the recipient into participation in the sacramental reality. The sacrament, like all symbols, points to a reality beyond itself and invites the participant to experience a world of meaning only accessible by entering into the world of the symbol. However, unlike non-sacramental symbols, the sacrament also brings the noumenal reality to which it points into contact with the phenomenal reality of the participant, rendering it really present within time and space. It creates a space through which the participant can experience, first hand, the eternal in the temporal, the divine within human reality. Of particular significance for Dulles and for our purposes here, the sacrament accomplishes this work, specifically, *through* the instrumentality of its rich and profound symbolism. It is the symbolic nature

²⁰⁸ See, for example, “Symbol, Myth and the Biblical Revelation,” 2-3; *Models of Revelation*, 131-32.

of the sacrament that allows it to open up a space within which the human person encounters the grace of God, receives it, and experiences its transformative power.

In this chapter I will consider the ways in which Dulles has applied his precise and technical understanding of sacrament to the work and mission, nature and reality of the church. Along the way I will seek to clarify and critique Dulles' special affinity for the sacramental model of the church – an affinity which remained fundamental to his own ecclesiology throughout his life. Late in his career, Dulles came to embrace an additional ecclesial model – a view of the church as the “community of disciples” – inspired by what Dulles characterized as “a passing remark” in the first encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*.²⁰⁹ However, even after including and developing this model in an additional chapter of the second edition of *Models of the Church*, Dulles did not in any way suggest that the inclusion of the discipleship model mitigated or reduced the special prominence or conciliatory potential of the sacramental model. The closest he came to such a statement was to suggest that the discipleship model, similar to the sacramental model, has “potentialities as a basis for a comprehensive ecclesiology.”²¹⁰ An examination of Dulles' corpus as a whole reveals that a view of the church as sacramental by nature is personally important and meaningful for Dulles in a way none of the other models or approaches are. As such, his conviction concerning the sacramental nature of the ecclesial reality is discernibly operative – if only implicit at times – permeating his publications from the beginning of his career.

²⁰⁹ See John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* 8. Cf. Dulles, “Community of Disciples as a Model of Church,” 99-120.

²¹⁰ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 207.

B. Origin of Dulles' Sacramental Ecclesiology

The notion that the church is, by nature, a sacramental reality developed gradually over the first two decades of Dulles' theological career, though in an implied and nascent form it could be discerned, just under the surface, from his earliest publications. A seminal form of a sacramental ecclesiology can be found, for example, in his very early study of the ecclesiology of St. Cyprian, through which he discovers a subtle embrace within Cyprian's ecclesiology of sacrament as an instrument of church unity.²¹¹ Though Dulles makes no attempt in this early publication to directly engage the relationship of sacrament and church in his own thought, the interest was already present, and the teaching appeared ready to emerge as Dulles began his formal theological studies.

1. Woodstock College and the Jesuit Theologate

During Dulles' theologate at Woodstock College (the formal theological training of Jesuit formation, 1953-1957), two faculty members stood out as particularly significant influences on both his intellectual and theological formation, John Courtney Murray and Gustave Weigel, both of whom were sympathetic to the spirit of ecclesiastical renewal leading up to the Second Vatican Council.²¹² Weigel, especially, became a theological mentor to Dulles and had a lasting influence on his interests and development. Reflecting on his theologate many years later, Dulles recalled, "Under the guidance of Fr. Gustave Weigel I developed a special interest in the act of faith and in

²¹¹ Dulles, "Church Unity and Roman Primacy," 33-48.

²¹² Cf. Carey, *Avery Cardinal Dulles, SJ*, 120 ff. Murray stood personally as an example of the tumultuous theological climate of the time, having been silenced in 1955 for teachings on religious liberty and the separation of Church and State that were to be embraced less than a decade later at Vatican II. Weigel, likewise, viewed suspiciously by some for his work in the area of Protestant theology, was vindicated by the council's encouragement of ecumenical dialogue.

ecclesiology, two treatises that he taught. At my request Father Weigel guided me in much of my private reading. After taking me through the entire corpus of Cyprian, he introduced me to the study of the ecumenical movement, in which Catholics were just beginning to get involved.”²¹³ The introduction proved to be a fruitful one, as Dulles quickly became involved in ecumenical work, and continued to be active in ecumenical dialogues for the duration of his career.

Likely harking back to his own liberal Presbyterian religious upbringing,²¹⁴ Dulles’ interest in a sacramental ecclesiology had much to do initially (and perhaps always) with his interest in, and commitment to, ecumenism. Early on Dulles recognized in the concept of “sacrament,” with its visible form and its power to communicate invisible grace, a tool of great potential benefit for harmonizing the traditionally Protestant emphasis on the mystical elements within the church with the traditionally Catholic insistence on its institutional forms. The focused reading of Protestant theology, guided by Weigel, resulted in the published study mentioned above. Though this study argued primarily for St. Cyprian’s teaching on the essential and necessary unity of the individual episcopate and the larger church, it found, significantly, that for Cyprian, there is a certain sacramental character to this unity – a unity that is central to the identity of the church.²¹⁵

Weigel himself was actively engaged in research and writing on ecumenism and Protestant theology, but his influence on Dulles went beyond ecclesiological topics.

²¹³ Dulles, *A Testimonial to Grace*, 103-4.

²¹⁴ Carey, *Avery Cardinal Dulles, SJ*, 1-13. Both Dulles’ grandfather and paternal great-grandfather were prominent Presbyterian ministers, and though Dulles’ father, John Foster Dulles did not pursue a career in ministry, Dulles’ early life at home “was permeated with a religious atmosphere that came from the liberal Presbyterian heritage of his paternal grandparents.”

²¹⁵ Dulles, “Church Unity and Roman Primacy in the Doctrine of St. Cyprian,” 35.

Patrick Carey notes, “Through Weigel, Dulles was introduced to the systematic study of ecclesiology, fundamental theology, Protestant theology, and ecumenism – abiding interests throughout his later career as a theologian.”²¹⁶ Weigel also introduced Dulles to the writings of Paul Tillich, from whom Dulles recalled he “first learned the importance of symbol for the theology of revelation.”²¹⁷ Eventually Dulles would come to fully embrace a symbolic realism, “in which reality is held to have a symbolic structure,” and this would become particularly important for his theology of revelation.²¹⁸ It also had immediate implications for his ecclesiology, however. The combination of interests in ecclesiology in both its Roman Catholic and Protestant forms, apologetics and ecumenism, and a view of reality as deeply characterized by symbol, seemed to lead naturally and perhaps even inexorably, to an understanding of the ecclesial reality as fundamentally sacramental.

In 1955, the third of his four years of theologate, Dulles published two articles that provide some insight into his developing realization of the connection between sacramentality and ecclesial unity: on the one hand, unity within the Roman Catholic Church; on the other, a means to overcome the dichotomy originating in Reformation theology between a “visible” and an “invisible” church.²¹⁹

²¹⁶ Carey, *Avery Cardinal Dulles, SJ*, 120-121.

²¹⁷ Dulles, *A Testimonial to Grace*, 104.

²¹⁸ Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System* (New York: Crossroad, 1992; expanded edition New York: Crossroad, 1995), 20; cf. Dulles, *A Testimonial to Grace*, 126, where Dulles reflects on the thesis of his book *Models of Revelation*: “I argued in favor of symbolic realism, and . . . therefore found myself able to affirm the predominantly symbolic character of revelation without minimizing the historical and doctrinal aspects that were so prominent in Catholic teaching.”

²¹⁹ On Dulles’ theological education during his Jesuit formation see Carey, *Avery Cardinal Dulles, SJ*, 118-133, esp. 123-126. It is evident from the articles published by Dulles during this time that the problem of Church unity was of great, and growing, importance to him – both unity within the Roman Catholic Church and unity among the various Christian denominations.

In the first article, “The Protestant Concept of the Church,”²²⁰ Dulles focused on the divide between the Protestant and Catholic ecclesiology of the time. Much of the emphasis is on, first, the recognition by both sides of the dire consequences Christian disunity has brought to the evangelistic endeavor, and the real desire on the part of both Protestant and Catholic theologians to not only embrace a personal, “vertical” faith but to do so within the context of an authentic *koinonia* or worshipping, believing community. Dulles does not at this early point posit a sacramental understanding of the nature of the church itself as an agent of ecumenical progress, but recognizes that there are “essential aspects” of a New Testament *koinonia* which are lacking in the present form of fellowship shared by the members of the World Council of Churches, and these missing essential elements are “the full common witness and full sharing of the sacramental life.”²²¹

Dulles pointed out that the tendency in Protestant ecclesiology “since the time of Sabatier” (1904), was to speak of two churches – a visible church and an invisible church.²²² He did not accept this dichotomy as legitimate, but was very much aware that it was real and powerful in the minds of many, particularly Protestant, theologians of the time,²²³ finding expression in a variety of ways. In addition to the aforementioned “visible” vs. “invisible” distinction, one could also encounter this divide described in

²²⁰ Dulles, “The Protestant Concept of the Church,” 330-335.

²²¹ Ibid., 333, quoting Visser ‘t Hooft, then Secretary General of the WCC.

²²² Ibid., 330. The reference is to Auguste Sabatier (1839-1901), French Protestant theologian and scholar who wrote *Religions of Authority and the Religion of the Spirit*, published posthumously in 1904. Dulles was no doubt also familiar with this trend within Protestant ecclesiology on a more personal level, as his grandfather, Allen Macy Dulles had dealt with similar themes in *The True Church - A Study (Historical and Scriptural)*, (New York; Chicago; Toronto: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1907).

²²³ See, for example, Dulles, “The Protestant Concept of the Church,” esp. 330-332. This article discusses this dichotomy between the “visible” and “invisible” church in some detail, with the purpose of educating the Catholic clergy of the time on the subject. It is presented as an understanding originating in Reformation (and especially Martin Luther’s) theology, and as a peculiarly Protestant understanding; one toward which Dulles is not sympathetic.

terms of “spiritual” vs. “authoritarian”, “mystical” compared to “hierarchical” or “institutional”, and at times even the “spiritual” vs. the “social” reality of the church.²²⁴

While a number of these dichotomous pairs were in play in the theological literature of the time, the root issue remained the same: the question of unity among, vs. distinction between, the human and divine elements of the church.

However, Dulles also recognized that the situation was changing somewhat, or softening perhaps, and that more recently there had been a growing interest among Protestant theologians in the social dimension of the church. Whereas for traditional Protestant ecclesiology, any social element to the church would, in this schema, have been relegated to what was considered the ‘visible church’ (the institutional elements of the church), the softening noted by Dulles was toward a view that the ‘invisible church’ (the mystical body of Christ, or the spiritual elements within the church), was to be understood not only as individuals in relationship with Christ, but as individuals in relationship with each other – i.e., a social reality – as well. Dulles noted in fact that “the relationship between the Church and the churches is perhaps the major issue” in the Protestant theology of the day.²²⁵

²²⁴ See *ibid.*, 334: “Hierarchy, and especially the Roman primacy, to [Protestants] imply a blasphemous substitution of human authority for the interior guidance of the Spirit;” *ibid.*, 330, “Since the time of Sabatier, it has become fashionable to contrast religions of authority with the religion of the Spirit. Authority is imposition from above; in tendency, it is hierarchical. The spirit is impulsion from within; in tendency it is mystical;” and again, “One of the most persistent elements in Protestant theology is the notion that there exist two Churches – the one mystical or invisible, the other institutional or visible.” Dulles revisits this theme in many of his writings, for example, in Dulles revisits this theme in many of his writings, for example, in *The Dimensions of the Church*, 20, 26-28 *et passim*; *Revelation and the Quest for Unity*, 164; “The Church, the Churches, and the Catholic Church,” *Theological Studies* 33, no. 2 (June 1972): 199-234 at 203; and of course the more explicit treatments, *Imaging the Church for the 1980’s* and *Models of the Church*.

²²⁵ Dulles, “The Protestant Concept of the Church,” 333.

A second article, taking a more liturgical approach, appeared in the journal *Worship* later the same year.²²⁶ Here Dulles continued to develop his thought on the importance of *koinonia* for an authentic ecclesiology, with particular emphasis on the profound interdependence of sacramental (Eucharistic) communion and the unity which defines the *koinonia* of the church.²²⁷ Carey notes that in this article, “Dulles outlined his own views of the mystical body of Christ as a core part of his understanding of sacramental unity.”²²⁸ In this presentation Dulles began to develop an understanding of the mutual interdependence of ecclesiology and sacramental theology, asserting that not only is the Eucharist fundamental for signifying and realizing the “mutual union of the faithful,” but also that the reality of the church as the mystical body of Christ is an essential component for understanding what sort of unity is actually accomplished via Eucharistic communion.²²⁹ For Dulles, the “mutual union of the faithful,” denoted by the term *koinonia*, is sacramentally constituted. This is not yet a fully developed sacramental ecclesiology, but nonetheless represents a significant step beyond the subtle intimations of his Cyprian study, and toward an understanding of the church, essentially bound up with sacrament, as a basic theological assumption. The unity of the mystical body is fundamentally important for understanding “sacrament” just as sacramental efficacy is fundamentally important for understanding “church.”

²²⁶ Dulles, “Church Unity,” *Worship* 29, no. 9 (October 1955): 509-517.

²²⁷ *Communio* as a description of the communion within the church is taken up by Vatican II (especially *Unitatis Redintegratio*), but the council did not use the term *koinonia* specifically. For a close study of the ecumenical use of the term, see Susan K. Wood, S. C. L., “Ecclesial Koinonia in Ecumenical Dialogues,” *One in Christ* 30, no. 2 (1994): 124-145. Cf. also *The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries*, Common Statement of the Tenth Round of the U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004).

²²⁸ Carey, *Avery Cardinal Dulles, SJ*, 124.

²²⁹ Dulles, “Church Unity,” 510.

2. Advent of the Second Vatican Council

Historical circumstances further contributed to the creation of an environment ripe for Dulles' embrace of a sacramental ecclesiology. As mentioned above, at the time of Dulles' theologate at Woodstock and his subsequent doctoral studies at the Gregorian University in Rome just prior to the opening of Vatican II, among the most dramatic Catholic-Protestant divergences on the nature of the church concerned the question of its visibility. Prior to Vatican II, a growing number of Protestant theologians were countering what they perceived to be a long-standing Catholic over-emphasis on the visibility of the church with what turned out to be a corresponding over-emphasis of its spiritual, mystical reality.²³⁰ But the *nouvelle théologie* movement in France, and the writings of Karl Rahner in Germany, were altering Catholic perspectives both in Europe and North America.

Dulles was well-versed in, and certainly admired, the writings of Rahner and the *nouvelle théologiens*, both of whom argued for a sacramental view of the church. Looking back on this time in his career Dulles recalled, "my heart was drawn to the *nouvelle théologie* which had begun to develop in France at the close of World War II. I tried to read as much as I could of authors such as Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, and Yves Congar, all of whom were retrieving the patristic and medieval heritage in a modern context."²³¹ According to Carey, Dulles also recalled how he "'devoured' ... Rahner's articles in *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* and the first volume of his *Schriften zur*

²³⁰ Dulles felt this issue was becoming sufficiently commonplace and serious enough to warrant a focused response, thus addressed it specifically in "The Protestant Concept of the Church," an article written for the benefit of fellow Catholic clergy, published in *The American Ecclesiastical Review* 132 (January-June, 1955): 330-35.

²³¹ Dulles, *A Testimonial to Grace*, 104.

Theologie (1960) before he finished his theological education.”²³² As Dulles studied and published on the subject, he seemed to grow increasingly convinced that a recognition of the church’s nature as fundamentally sacramental (a sign and instrument of divine grace) held the greatest potential for reconciliation – or at least growth in understanding – between those who wished to emphasize the church’s mystical reality but described it in terms of the unfortunately imprecise notion “the invisible church,” and those who wished to emphasize its communal aspects and that community’s human reality.²³³

The ecclesiological teachings of Vatican II would prove to be an ally in this conciliatory quest. Few would dispute this council as the watershed event of Roman

²³² Carey, *Avery Cardinal Dulles, SJ*, 122.

²³³ See Dulles, “The Protestant Concept of the Church,” esp. 333-334. This is also evident in a number of the articles collected in Dulles’ *A Church to Believe In*, particularly “The Church: Witness and Sacrament of Faith”, 41-52, originally published as “La Chiesa: Sacramento e Fondamento della Fede,” in R. Latourelle and G. O’Collins, eds., *Problemi e Prospettive di Teologia Fondamentale* (Brescia: Queriniana, 1980); “The True Church: In Dialogue with Liberal Protestantism”, 53-65, originally delivered as 1979 Presidential Address to the American Theological Society, published as “The True Church: An Exercise in Theological Neoplatonism,” in *Catholic Mind*, 77, no. 1337 (November 1979), 8-22; and “The Church According to Thomas Aquinas”, 149-169, originally published as “The Spiritual Community of Man: The Church According to Saint Thomas,” in A. Parel, ed., *Calgary Aquinas Studies*, 125-53 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978).

In addition to the previously mentioned 1955 articles, “Church Unity” and “The Protestant Concept of the Church,” other relevant publications during this period include a 1956 article on one Protestant approach to revelation, “Paul Tillich and the Bible,” in which Dulles argues for the sacramental quality of revelation and the authority of the Church in Tillich’s theology, and a 1960 article, “The Protestant Preacher and the Prophetic Mission,” where Dulles examines the possibility of a sacramental character to Protestant ordination, particularly around the concept of the *votum sacramentum*; cf. *The Protestant Churches and the Prophetic Office, Excerpta ex dissertatione* (Woodstock, MD: Woodstock College Press, 1961).

In 1967 Dulles published *The Dimensions of the Church* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press), in which he took a close look at the growth in understanding of the Church’s visibility from Bellarmine to Vatican II, as a growth that came about within the context of Vatican II’s embrace of the sacramental nature of the church. In “Dogma as an Ecumenical Problem,” *Theological Studies* 29, no. 3 (Sept 1968): 397-416, Dulles draws upon Rahner’s assertion of the sacramental function of dogmatic language to propose a way past the ecumenical impasse arising from certain forms of ecclesial dogmatism. A few years later Dulles undertook a more formal study of the potential for the sacramental ecclesiology emerging from Vatican II to “illuminate this distinction between the Church as visible society and as community of grace,” in “The Church the Churches and the Catholic Church.” Dulles’ mature application of a sacramental ecclesiology to the problem of church unity came in 1974 with *Models of the Church*, insisting that “the institutional or structural aspect of the Church – its external reality – is essential,” yet “the institutional or structural aspect is never sufficient to constitute the church”; rather, these externals “must palpably appear as the actual expression of the faith, hope and love of living men,” thus, “as a sacrament the Church has both an outer and an inner aspect” (pp. 68-9).

Catholic sacramental ecclesiology. Although the concept of church as sacrament may be encountered in theological writings earlier than the council, it is not until Vatican II that it received anything approaching an official sanction as a legitimate, even important, image of the church.²³⁴ It was approached only tentatively before the council, and is still in the process of becoming properly understood, let alone embraced, in certain circles even within Roman Catholicism. Dulles' appropriation and use of "sacrament" as a theologically useful, initially, then important, and finally essential image of the church was sown in the decade leading up to the council, emerged with greater clarity and strength in the years just after the council's 1964 publication of *Lumen Gentium*, and grew to central importance within his own ecclesiology during his career-long project of harmonizing various contemporary ecclesiologies.

While the years just prior to the opening of the council saw Dulles directing more of his energy toward questions related to the nature of divine revelation and ecumenism than to the nature of the church *per se*, the advent of Vatican II brought the issue to the fore once again. Much of the concern among ecclesiologists leading up to the council centered on the task of crafting a theology of the church that was faithful to the tradition

²³⁴ For a history of the use of sacrament in reference to the church see Leonardo Boff, *Die Kirche als Sakrament im Horizont der Welterfahrung; Versuch einer Legitimation und einer strukturfunktionalistischen Grundlegung der Kirche im Anschluss an das II. Vatikanische Konzil* (Paderborn: Verlag Bonifacius-Druckerei, 1972); Peter Smulders, "L'Eglise sacrement de salut," in Guilherme Baraúna, ed., *L'Eglise de Vatican II* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1967), Vol. 2. pp. 313-38. Cf. *Models of the Church*, 63, where Dulles, relying particularly on Smulders, notes that a sacramental ecclesiology was "anticipated by Cyprian, Augustine, Aquinas, and Scheeben," and "emerged in full clarity in our own [the twentieth] century."

In *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 44 n. 36, Joseph Ratzinger points to several studies in German that also trace this history: Werner Löser, *Im Geiste des Origenes* (Frankfurt: Knecht, 1976), 94-99, who, according to Ratzinger, "points out that as early as 1936, Hans Urs von Balthasar had explored the significance of Origen's use of the term "sacrament" as a designation for the Church"; Matthäus Bernards, "Zur Lehre von der Kirche als Sakrament. Beobachtungen aus der Theologie des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts", in *Münchener Theologische Zeitung* 20 (1969), 29-54; and H. Schnackers, *Kirche als Sakrament und Mutter. Zur Ecclesiologie von H. de Lubac* (Frankfurt, 1979), esp. 76-85.

while at the same time sensitive to the ecumenical work that had begun to bear fruit, and to the potential for similarly fruitful interreligious dialogue. Hence early schemas on the church which presented its nature in overly institutional, exclusive terms were roundly rejected, and there could be discerned among the council Fathers a growing embrace of the language of “*koinonia*,” or communion, and sacrament to describe the ecclesial reality. Both of these categories represented a real outreach to non-Roman Catholic Christians and other people of good will. The category of communion made it possible for the council fathers to speak of one’s relationship with the church in terms of degree rather than the all or nothing of times past. The sacramental connotation of the church as “sign and instrument” – specifically sign and instrument of salvation – presented the mission of the church as more open, welcoming and beneficent, with an outward-looking mission toward the salvation of all peoples and nations, regardless of their relationship to the Roman Catholic Church.

Such talk aligned well with Dulles’ on-going thought and work in ecumenism, as much of his effort in this regard was directed toward understanding and clarifying points of divergence and convergence between Protestant and Catholic understandings of church.²³⁵ A year before the council published its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, Dulles published *Apologetics and the Biblical Christ*.²³⁶ In this short book Dulles anticipated the sacramental language of the council with his description of

²³⁵ For example, in addition to “The Protestant Concept of the Church” already mentioned, see “The Protestant Preacher and the Prophetic Mission,” *Theological Studies* 21 (1960): 544-580; *The Protestant Churches and the Prophetic Office*; and “Protestant-Catholic Relations in Germany,” *The Epistle* 27 (1961): 2-11.

²³⁶ Dulles, *Apologetics and the Biblical Christ*, Woodstock Paper No. 6 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1963), 43.

the work of the church using language strikingly similar to that of *Lumen Gentium*.²³⁷ In an article published a few years later, Dulles himself summarized the argument of the book as such: “even a New Testament apologetics must take account of the corporate testimony of the church itself as sign and herald of revelation, and that it cannot achieve its goal by employing only the objective techniques recommended in positivistic historiography.”²³⁸

A few months after the promulgation of Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, in late 1965, Dulles published a commentary on the constitution in which he notes that, already at that early date, there had been discernible growth in ecclesiological circles toward the recognition of the “sacramental dimensions of Christianity.”²³⁹ He was speaking here most specifically of the burgeoning recognition of a certain sacramental character to Christianity in some Protestant writing, though the comment applies even more strongly to reform-minded theologians within the Catholic Church, particularly those of the *nouvelle théologie* school, who had begun to apply the concept of sacrament not only to the individual rites but to the nature of the church in general.²⁴⁰

Two additional publications appeared in the mid-1960s in which Dulles continued to hone and develop his sacramental ecclesiology. In the wake of the remarkable

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Dulles, “Revelation in Recent Catholic Theology,” *Theology Today* 24, no. 3 (1967): 350-365 at 362.

²³⁹ Dulles, “The Constitution on Divine Revelation In Ecumenical Perspective,” *The American Ecclesiastical Review* 154 (January-June 1966): 217-231 at 220 n. 3.

²⁴⁰ See, for example, Henri de Lubac, S. J., *Méditation sur l’Église*, vol. 27, Théologie (Paris: Aubier, 1953); *Catholicism: les aspects sociaux du dogme* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1947); Yves Marie-Joseph Congar, O. P., *Esquisses du Mystère de l’Église*, vol. 8, Unam Sanctam, Nouvelle ed. (Paris; Maubourg: Éditions du Cerf, 1953). For a good discussion of the sacramental ecclesiology being developed during this period by de Lubac and Congar, including Congar’s significant contributions to the council documents, see Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie & Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), esp. Chapter 7, 242-287.

teachings coming out of Vatican II, his notion of a sacramental character of the church's nature had suddenly a much surer footing. "Symbol, Myth and the Biblical Revelation," published in 1966, explored the church's use of symbol within a sacramental (particularly Eucharistic) context, beginning with a recognition of the way in which not only Christ, but also the church, recapitulates and fulfills the rich symbolism of the great events described in the Old Testament.²⁴¹ This work marked a move away from the question of church unity *per se* toward an investigation of the nature of divine revelation and the role of symbol in its communication.²⁴² Nevertheless, Dulles' developing sacramental ecclesiology continued to be important, as his investigation of myth and symbol in revelation served as a way to further and deepen his understanding of the church in relationship to a sacramental theology and a theology of revelation. Dulles saw each of these three realities (revelation, sacrament, and the church) as highly imbued with and dependent upon a recognition of the symbolic nature of reality, beginning with the unmistakably symbolic language of the Sacred Scriptures.²⁴³

²⁴¹ *Theological Studies* 27, no. 1 (March, 1966): 1-26.

²⁴² This work was anticipated by two publications on the topic of divine revelation, without the explicit emphasis on the importance of symbol: "The Theology of Revelation," *Theological Studies* 25, no. 1 (March, 1964): 43-58, and "The Constitution on Divine Revelation in Ecumenical Perspective," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 154 (January-June, 1966): 217-231. It was followed up with several publications appearing rapid-fire in which the role of symbol in communicating divine revelation was a prominent theme: "Symbol in Revelation," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 13, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 861-863; "Theological Table-Talk: Revelation in Recent Catholic Theology," *Theology Today* 24, no. 3 (October, 1967): 350-365; *Revelation and the Quest for Unity* (Washington, D.C.: Corpus Books, 1968); and *Revelation Theology: A History* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969). The project culminated in the early 1980s with "Symbolic Structure of Revelation," *Theological Studies* 41, no. 1 (March, 1980): 51-73 and the first edition of *Models of Revelation*.

²⁴³ Dulles draws from numerous sources, both philosophical and theological, on the nature of myth and symbol, and their function within religious language, particularly the language of the Christian Scriptures. Philosophical sources include S. Langer, M. Eliade, I. T. Ramsey, S. Wisse, and E. Cassirer as well as the highly philosophical theology of Karl Rahner. On the question of the mythical and symbolic in religious language, especially the language of Scripture, Dulles engages P. Tillich, K. Barth, B. Childs, and J. McKenzie along with Rahner and a number of voices from the tradition, including Augustine, Aquinas, Pius IX and XII.

With this as background, Dulles published *The Dimensions of the Church* in 1967, just after the close of Vatican II. While this work was most overtly concerned with the changes brought about in Roman Catholic ecclesiology and ecumenism by the council, it is also important in the current context as a summation of much of Dulles' thoughts up to that point on the relationship of church, sacrament and revelation, and as a preparation for his fuller treatment to come in *Models of the Church*. After an introductory chapter emphasizing the expansiveness of the church in dimensional terms (length, breadth, height, width), chapter two considers more specifically the ecclesial *aggiornamento* emerging from the council as evidenced in *Lumen Gentium* and *Unitatis Redintegratio*. Here Dulles summarizes the council's teaching on the sacramentality of the church's nature, intimating much of his own in the process: "Just as a sacrament is a sign of the grace which it brings about, so the church, rather than containing the totality of salvation, points toward it, and strives by its prayers and labors to actualize God's kingdom among men."²⁴⁴

The Dimensions of the Church drew upon Vatican II (especially *Lumen Gentium*) to highlight the similarities between "the sacraments" and the church as it points to salvation. In the midst of this argument Dulles made his own sacramental ecclesiology very clear: "the Church itself, as a kind of general sacrament, was evidently instituted by Christ to be an enduring means of salvation."²⁴⁵

The work was well received with respect to its summary of the important ecclesiological developments coming out of Vatican II, but was not universally lauded.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ Dulles, *Dimensions of the Church*, 27.

²⁴⁵ Dulles, *Dimensions of the Church*, 51.

²⁴⁶ Tobias Maeder, for example, in "The Dimensions of the Church: A Postconciliar Reflection," in *Worship* 42 no. 6 (1968): 381, praised the work for giving "a summary, an excellent one, of the

In an extended review in *Una Sancta*, David Granskou criticized Dulles' book for embracing a vision of church whose borders are too fluid, leaving "no place to be set aside as specifically sacred, and no specific constitution of the Church ... ordained for all time."²⁴⁷ This is a surprising reaction from a Lutheran professor, for as Dulles had recently made clear in "The Protestant Concept of the Church," the tendency among Protestant ecclesiologists of the time was to conceive of the true church as the "invisible church," and deny that the institutional or structural elements of the church are strictly necessary, while Catholic ecclesiology was often guilty of overemphasizing the very "specific constitution of the church" which Granskou found lacking. Granskou's critique seems to align with an emergent shift in Protestant theology, even within the context of a criticism of Dulles' sacramental ecclesiology, toward recognizing that certain visible, structural elements "set aside as specifically sacred" are a necessary, constitutive element of the Christian church.

When the first edition of *Models of the Church* came out in 1974, a number of additional significant influences on Dulles' sacramental ecclesiology became apparent, including Otto Semmelroth, Edward Schillebeeckx and Paul Smulders.²⁴⁸ Though the latest of these authors' studies referenced by Dulles as supporting a sacramental ecclesiology appeared in 1966, and thus it may be reasonably assumed that Dulles was at least aware of their work when he published *The Dimensions of the Church*, he did not

ecclesiology of Vatican II, showing how it has changed from pre-Vatican II ecclesiology," and yet considered that Dulles succeeded in showing "only inchoatively" what Dulles himself claimed as the book's unifying theme: "the Church's relationship to the total human family."

²⁴⁷ David Granskou, "A New Party Line," *Una Sancta* 25, no. 3 (1968): 98-102 at 102.

²⁴⁸ Semmelroth, *Die Kirche als Ursakrament* (Frankfurt: Joesf Knecht, 1953); Schillebeeckx, *De Christusontmoeting als sacrament van de godsonthoening* (Bilthoven: H. Nelissen, 1960), appearing in English translation in 1963 as *Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward); Smulders, "L'Eglise sacrament du salut" in Guilherme Baraúna, ed., *L'Eglise de Vatican II: Etudes autour de la Constitution conciliaire sur l'Église* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1966).

explicitly appeal to them regarding a sacramental ecclesiology prior to *Models of the Church*. In *Models*, however, he draws upon them initially to support his claim that the sacramental model or understanding of the church has gained widespread support, and in other key passages to rebut criticisms of the model, to clarify definitions, and explain the relationship between the ministerial priesthood, the sacramental sacrifice of Christ, and the sacramental nature of the church.²⁴⁹

Dulles' project in *Models of the Church*, while expressing his own mature sacramental ecclesiology and drawing upon the sacramental ecclesiologies of a number of other influential theologians of the time, was much more than a re-presentation or summary of this ecclesiology. Chapter IV of the work did accomplish this much – explaining what it means to conceive of the church in sacramental terms, the strengths and potential challenges inherent in this approach, and an exposition – albeit somewhat implicit – of Dulles' own understanding and appreciation for an ecclesiology that incorporates a sacramental view. Dulles goes further, however, to employ this model as a way to support and embrace the sound theology contained in both the Reformation-era emphasis on the primacy of the mystical, invisible reality of the church and counter-Reformation theology's emphasis on the necessity of its visible, institutional and communal reality.

Dulles leverages the momentum within the sacramental ecclesiology movement, provided by high-profile ecclesiologists in growing numbers and the official sanction by Vatican II, to demonstrate how these two seemingly irreconcilable emphases can not only

²⁴⁹ On the prevalence of the model among theologians of the time, see *Models of the Church*, 64. Dulles references Semmelroth, Rahner and Schillebeeckx in addressing certain critiques of the model on pp. 74-75; Semmelroth and Rahner to clarify what is meant by "church" in the sacramental approach on p. 148, and Semmelroth in his discussion of the sacramental priesthood and the sacramental nature of the church on p. 167.

exist in harmony but in fact draw synergistic energies from each other. A view of the ecclesiological whole as fundamentally sacramental demands both a visible sign (the *sacramentum* in the language of the schools), and a mystical reality experienced as divine grace (the *res sacramenti*). The sacrament accomplishes the communication of that grace, according to Dulles, only when both of these elements are present, and operative: “The Church . . . is not an empty sign; it signifies the reality of grace both within and beyond itself – the grace given by God, who loves, and wills to save, all men in Christ.”²⁵⁰ For this reason, while admitting candidly that it is impossible and improper to attempt to construct one “supermodel” of the church that adequately describes its mystery, Dulles can nonetheless contend that the sacramental model of the church “seems to have exceptional capacities for incorporating what is sound in each of the other four models” and holds at least the greatest possibility for use “as the basis for a systematic ecclesiology.”²⁵¹

3. Symbol and Sacrament

Naturally, Dulles’ sacramental ecclesiology did not develop in a vacuum. As noted briefly above, Dulles’ interests during his Jesuit theological formation ranged far beyond ecclesiology, including focused studies on fundamental theology, Protestant theology, and ecumenism. What has not perhaps been made clear thus far is the fact that during this same period of theological formation, Dulles was becoming increasingly interested in the concept of symbol and the function of symbols within human communication and experience. As a result of these investigations, an ontology of

²⁵⁰ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 148.

²⁵¹ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 206.

symbol developed that would prove deeply influential in every area of his theological considerations.

Dulles read widely on the nature and modality of symbol, beginning with the writings of Paul Tillich, which figured prominently in the reading program on Protestant theology directed by Gustave Weigel during Dulles' time at Woodstock.²⁵² Through his study of Tillich, Dulles became convinced of the importance of symbol, and its special communicative powers, within a theology of revelation.²⁵³ Heavily influenced by the writings of authors such as Mircea Eliade and Michael Polanyi especially, he grew to consider the nature of reality itself as inherently symbolic – a view he would later refer to as a 'symbolic realist' philosophy.²⁵⁴ This understanding of reality as essentially symbolic led Dulles to embrace the power of symbol to mediate communication, and to recognize the symbol's unique capacity to effect or accomplish the communication of transcendent reality to human minds.

Thus the concept of symbol played an especially important role in Dulles' theology of revelation, as will be considered in more detail in the following chapter, but symbol was also fundamental to his theology of sacrament – both in general terms, and

²⁵² In addition to Tillich and a number of other theological sources that will be considered shortly, Dulles also familiarized himself with the concept of symbol as it functioned within philosophy through the writings of, for example, Michael Polanyi (see note 254, below), Paul Ricoeur, especially *The Symbolism of Evil*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) and *Interpretation Theory*, (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), Ernst Cassirer, most notably *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 4 vols., (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953-1996), and Wilbur Urban, *Language and Reality*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1939). He also familiarized himself with symbol as it functioned within literary theory, through the writings of Phillip Wheelwright, especially *Metaphor and Reality*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962).

²⁵³ See Dulles, *A Testimonial to Grace*, 103-104.

²⁵⁴ Among the works of Eliade, those most influential for Dulles include *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, vol. 2, *Mythical Thought* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955), "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism" in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), and *Images and Symbols* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961). Dulles also held philosopher Michael Polanyi in high esteem, and quoted or referred to his writings often, especially *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), *Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi* (London: Routledge, 1969), and *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

as that concept applies specifically to the nature of the church. Symbol, in fact, became for Dulles the foundational concept within which the concept of sacrament could be constructed and conceived. As the previous chapter argued, a sacrament, for Dulles, is first of all a symbol, but it is a special category of symbol which expresses and makes manifest a particular reality, i.e., the saving grace of Christ.²⁵⁵ When, therefore, in later publications Dulles referred to the church as a sacrament, whether in the context of the teachings of Vatican II or drawing from his own experience and contemplations, it was this understanding – a symbolic expression of divine grace – that was the operative concept.

It is clear from his early writings that Dulles' theological interest in the category of symbol was initially restricted to its use within a theology of revelation. Indeed Dulles mentions 'symbol' only in passing prior to his close look at Paul Tillich's theology of Biblical revelation, and even there Dulles examines the reality and modality of symbol within Tillich's system specifically with regard to its value as a revelatory medium.²⁵⁶ Dulles refers to symbol exactly once in the 1955 article "Church Unity" – in the context of the Eucharist as sacrament of church unity, significantly – but does not return to the concept outside of a revelatory context until the time of Vatican II.²⁵⁷

In 1966 however, with the publication of "Symbol, Myth and the Biblical Revelation," Dulles began to expand his theology of symbol to include a consideration of how symbol functions within and for the individual believer and the community of

²⁵⁵ Cf. pp. 43-53, above.

²⁵⁶ See Dulles, "Paul Tillich and the Bible," 345-367.

²⁵⁷ Dulles, "Church Unity," 509-517.

faith.²⁵⁸ He began by clarifying the distinctions and dependencies presented in the previous chapter, between the three closely related concepts of sign, symbol, and sacrament.²⁵⁹ “Very briefly,” he writes, “we may say that a symbol is a type of sign. It is a word, gesture, picture, statue, or some other type of reality which can be made present to the senses or the imagination, and which points to a reality behind itself.”²⁶⁰

Presence, therefore, is an important element of symbol, that differentiates it from ordinary signs or mere indicators. Seeing sacrament as a special case of symbol also served to emphasize the visible, physical, sensory component of sacrament that corresponded in Dulles’ later sacramental ecclesiology to the sign value of the church. The traditional “four marks” of the church (one, holy, catholic and apostolic) “have to be visible qualities of the church as it actually exists,” Dulles argues, “or else the Church would not be a sacrament of Christ – a visible expression of his invisible grace triumphing over human sin and alienation.”²⁶¹ Within this schema it is clear that a sacramental ecclesiology not only designates the church as an efficacious means of grace, making present a divine reality, but also contains an inherent claim that the church, as sacrament, does so in and through its character as sign and as symbol. This is important for reconciling, as Dulles was clearly intent to do, the visible, institutional elements of the church, including the community assembled together in worship, the hierarchical structure, and so on, with the mystical, spiritual elements. There can be no doubt about

²⁵⁸ Dulles, “Symbol, Myth and the Biblical Revelation,” 1-26.

²⁵⁹ For a fuller discussion of the sign-symbol-sacrament schema in Dulles’ theology, see Chapter one, above. For the relationship of symbol and sign see pp. 25-30; for the relationship of sign and sacrament see pp. 45-48; for the relationship of symbol and sacrament see pp. 52-53; and for the interrelationship of sign, symbol and sacrament as they function within Dulles’ ecclesiology, see pp. 65-67.

²⁶⁰ Dulles, “Symbol, Myth and the Biblical Revelation,” 2.

²⁶¹ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 134.

the necessity of the institutional element if the church, as sacrament, is to be an efficacious symbol.

Dulles does not present in this article the full characteristics of symbol that he develops in later writings, but several important characteristics are already present.²⁶² It is in this article that Dulles first lays out the principle characteristics of symbol, which, though presented briefly in chapter one, above, may be fruitfully elaborated here. First, a characteristic of symbol consistently emphasized by Dulles throughout his writings, and which he held as particularly important, is the power of the symbol to evoke, rather than simply indicate or denote, meaning. This aspect encapsulates perhaps more than any other the real distinction Dulles found, and considered most useful, between an arbitrary pointer or indicator and a symbol. Where a sign contains within itself some particular piece of information and communicates that information to the beholder, a symbol draws, or evokes, meaning from within the beholder. This the symbol can accomplish because it is not restricted by a one-to-one relationship with a specific meaning as is the sign, but rather works on the psyche to bring to awareness, or make present to the individual, the complex realities which are given meaning and significance for a community by the members of that community.

Thus the second important element of symbol is its polyvalence of meaning. As compared with the sign which has only one particular meaning, often arbitrarily assigned to it (for example we assign “go” to a green light; “stop” to a red light), the polyvalence of the symbol provides, according to Dulles, an “inexhaustible brood of potential

²⁶² A more explicit characterization of the concept of symbol operative in Dulles’ theology may be found in “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” *Theological Studies* 41, no. 1 (March 1980): 51-73 at 56; a fully mature presentation is found in *Models of Revelation*, 131-139, where, among other things, Dulles describes four characteristics of symbol that are important for, and paralleled by, revelation. Cf. pp. 34-38 in chapter one, above.

meanings” or affirmations.²⁶³ This is not to be confused with an inexhaustible *breadth* of meanings, which would suggest the symbol could mean anything whatever, rather suggests that as one participates more and more fully in the community which defines and receives the symbol as symbol, the symbol is able to evoke more and more meaning from the participant. Dulles quotes Susanne Langer describing the cross of Christ as an example of the polyvalence of meaning for this very potent symbol within the Christian community:

The cross is such a “charged” symbol: the actual instrument of Christ’s death, hence a symbol of suffering; first laid on his shoulders, an actual burden, as well as an actual product of human handiwork, and on both grounds a symbol of his accepted moral burden; also an ancient symbol of the four zodiac points, with a cosmic connotation; a “natural” symbol of cross-roads (we still use it on our highways as a warning before an intersection), and therefore of decision, crisis, choice; also of being crossed, i.e. of frustration, adversity, fate; and finally, to the artistic eye a cross is the figure of a man. All these and many other meanings lie dormant in that simple, familiar, significant shape. No wonder that it is a magical form! It is charged with meanings, all human and emotional and vaguely cosmic, so that they have become integrated into a connotation of the whole religious drama – sin, suffering, and redemption.²⁶⁴

The final characteristic which Dulles stresses in this initial presentation is the symbol’s *concreteness*. This is perhaps somewhat counter-intuitive, but is very important in order for the symbol to function evocatively. If the symbol were transient or abstract, it would not have the ability to capture one’s attention and gaze, to draw the beholder into its world, create or renew an emotionally charged attachment, invigorate commitment, or evoke meaning. Consider as a further example the symbol of one’s national flag. An abstract ideal of “flag” – even “*my* flag” – can perhaps cause some noticeable reaction,

²⁶³ See “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 62-63; *Models of Revelation*, 267.

²⁶⁴ Dulles, “Symbol, Myth and the Biblical Revelation,” 4. Cf. Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), 284 ff.

but cannot arrest one's attention the way a physical, concrete instance of the flag does when it is encountered, say, at a Memorial Day parade, or draped across the coffin of a fallen soldier, or rising slowly behind an Olympic champion.

The symbol's concreteness is an extension of the physical element of the sign, and an anticipation of the "visible expression" of sacramental grace. The two elements taken together – concreteness and evocative polyvalence – endow the symbol with its unique power and function. As Dulles puts it, "the inexhaustible riches which theologians and men of prayer have been able to find in the Bible would seem to be intimately bound up with its inspired symbolism; for every symbol, by reason of its concreteness and polyvalence, defies exhaustive translation into the abstract language of doctrinal discourse."²⁶⁵

As Dulles grew in his personal conviction that all "reality is held to have a symbolic structure,"²⁶⁶ and developed that understanding more precisely, this ontology of symbol informed his emerging sacramental ecclesiology in significant ways. At the risk of belaboring the obvious, Dulles' conviction that all of reality is inherently symbolic means that the church, also, has an inherently symbolic structure. By itself this would not go far, for it does not give any special insight into how the symbolic character of the church differs from the symbolic character of any other aspect or element of reality. However, considered together with an ecclesiology that views sacrament as exhibiting a certain constitutive relationship to the church, an understanding of the church as inherently symbolic sets the stage for an ontology of symbol to contribute to a more focused understanding of the church's sacramental character.

²⁶⁵ Dulles, "Symbol, Myth and the Biblical Revelation," 6.

²⁶⁶ Dulles, *Craft of Theology*, 20.

Thus as a symbolic reality, the sacrament of the church is evocative, polyvalent, and concrete. The importance of the concrete, historical and readily sensible aspect of the church's sacramental sign has already been considered in some detail, above. Dulles' theology of symbol simply reinforces the necessity of this visible, palpable element of the ecclesial community. The sacramental symbol of the church, however, is in this schema further characterized by the power to evoke a plenitude of meaning from those who participate in the symbol. As sacrament, the efficacy of the church goes beyond that of the symbol of course; as sacrament, the church is an instrument of saving grace. As symbol, however, it is also an instrument which has the power to communicate that grace only so far as one participates in the world created by the symbol, and allows the symbol to work upon one's imagination, will and intellect to solicit from within an understanding otherwise inaccessible. As symbol, furthermore, the sacrament of the church is equipped to communicate, continuously and inexhaustibly, the great mystery of its reality as the body of Christ.

C. Structure of Dulles' Sacramental Ecclesiology

In *The Dimensions of the Church*, Dulles was explicit in his application of the sacramental symbol concept to the life of the church as a whole. Though there is not in this work an indication that Dulles had come to a fully developed theology of the church as sacramental by nature, there are certainly indications within the text that such a theology is not far removed. For example, considering the charity proper to the missionary task, Dulles insists that "the Church in its full institutional reality should be a

symbol and expression of this divinely given charity.”²⁶⁷ In the same work, Dulles begins to indicate his reception and appropriation of the sacramental ecclesiology of Vatican II, to which we now turn.

1. Reception of Vatican II

As the foregoing developments in Dulles’ theology of sacrament and of the church suggest, by 1964 when the council published its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, he was well disposed to receive its teaching on the sacramental character of the church. He presented the council’s sacramental ecclesiology in *The Dimensions of the Church*, published shortly after the promulgation of *Lumen Gentium*, with the proper cautions that the council was more concerned with describing the church as a communion than as a sacrament.²⁶⁸ Nonetheless, the understanding of sacrament as descriptive of the church’s nature is a significant theme within the conciliar teachings, and Dulles recognizes this: “The Church, considered in its visible or institutional reality, is compared to the sacraments,” he notes. “Just as a sacrament is a sign of the grace which it brings about, so the church, rather than containing the totality of salvation, points toward it, and strives by its prayers and labors to actualize God’s kingdom among men.”²⁶⁹ Dulles is emphatic, in fact, that “for Vatican II, the idea of the church as sacrament is of foundational importance.” He pointed to at least ten places in the conciliar documents that referred to the church as sacrament: in *Lumen Gentium* 1, 9, 48 and 59; in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 5 and 26; in *Gaudium et Spes* 42 and 45; and in *Ad*

²⁶⁷ Dulles, *Dimensions of the Church*, 58.

²⁶⁸ Woodstock Papers: Occasional Essays for Theology, no. 8 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1967).

²⁶⁹ Dulles, *Dimensions of the Church*, 27.

Gentes 1 and 5.²⁷⁰ Dulles is quick to point out that the council’s teaching does not elevate the church to the same level as its divine founder, for in both “the New Testament and the fathers Christ is the great sacrament or mystery of salvation.” However, continues Dulles, “Christ is not complete without the Church which is his visible and effective presence on earth. Thus the Church may be seen, in Christ, as the encompassing sacrament.”²⁷¹

In 1967, the same year that Dulles published *The Dimensions of the Church*, the first volume of Herbert Vorgrimler’s four-volume *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* was published, containing a commentary on *Lumen Gentium* by Aloys Grillmeier entitled “The Mystery of the Church.”²⁷² In this commentary Grillmeier argued that “there is no definition of sacrament in the Constitution and no explanation of how exactly the term is to be applied to the Church.”²⁷³ This lack of clarity or definitiveness on the part of the council has doubtless contributed to a certain divergence of opinion on the details of the conciliar teaching. Nevertheless, Grillmeier goes on to conclude that the intent of the council was to “ascribe to the Church the value of a sacramental symbolism and instrumentality in the whole of the divine economy of salvation for all mankind and its history. The church is ‘the universal sacrament of salvation’ (Article 48, 2).”²⁷⁴ In his reception of the teaching, Dulles understood the phrase as it applied to the church to include at least the following two indications.

²⁷⁰ Dulles, “Nature, Mission and Structure of the Church,” in *Vatican II: Renewal Within Tradition*, ed. Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 26-36 at 26.

²⁷¹ Dulles, “Nature, Mission, and Structure of the Church,” 26.

²⁷² A. Grillmeier, “The Mystery of the Church,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 1, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder), 1967), 138-152.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 139.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

First, Dulles believed firmly that the teaching of Vatican II on the sacramentality of the church must be interpreted and understood within the context of the church as both People of God and Body of Christ – not as in any way replacing or supplanting either of those ancient and constant images of the church’s self-understanding. Indeed, in Dulles’ view, both of these images were necessary for an adequate understanding of the council’s sacramental ecclesiology. “In its overview of the images of the Church,” he writes, “Vatican II by no means dismissed the Body of Christ, or “mystical body,” the central theme of [*Lumen Gentium*] articles 7 and 8. The Council used the categories of People of God and Body of Christ as mutually complementary. It would be a mistake to imagine that with Vatican II the concept of the Church as People of God simply replaced that of Body of Christ. Both images were used to give concreteness to the more abstract and technical concept of sacrament.”²⁷⁵ Dulles furthermore insists, via Joseph Ratzinger, that one misunderstands or at least misappropriates the teaching of the council on the nature of the church unless the “two core terms of its ecclesiology” – sacrament, and People of God – are considered together.²⁷⁶ The doctrine of the church coming out of the council, therefore, as Dulles received it, is one in which both the people which constitute the church, the People of God, are the sign and instrument of salvation, of unity with God and with the whole human race, and furthermore the sign and instrument of the mystical ecclesial reality, the Body of Christ.

Secondly, concerning the council’s teaching on the sacramentality of the church, Dulles interprets *Lumen Gentium* 1, which he identifies as a “key text,” as referring to the church as “a kind of sacrament.” This well-known phrase, the *veluti sacramentum*

²⁷⁵ Dulles, “Nature, Mission and Structure,” 31.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

clause, will be reviewed more closely in the next section; for now it is only significant to point out that Dulles receives this teaching in the sense that makes a stronger, rather than weaker, statement about the church's sacramentality. Dulles continues to explain or qualify this teaching slightly, however, emphasizing that the notion of sacrament as applied to the church in the teachings of Vatican II must be understood as effecting a dynamic presence of divine grace; a grace that achieves a certain incarnational existence through the sacrament:

The concept of sacrament in Catholic theology involves not only signification but also the dynamic presence of the reality signified. The Church and grace are essentially connected, Grace itself has an incarnational structure, for it seeks to express itself in a palpable and social form, and does not fully achieve itself until it succeeds in doing so. The Church, as a visible entity, comes into being at the point where believers in community recognize themselves as recipients of God's gift in Christ.²⁷⁷

Finally, Dulles cautions against allowing a sacramental view of the church to blur the critical distinction between the church and Christ. "In certain periods," he writes, "the Church has been seen as a quasi-incarnation of the divine."²⁷⁸ Dulles himself is clear in his teaching that the church is not a second incarnation of God, nor is it a prolongation of the incarnation. It is the expression of the incarnate one in history, and as such may be spoken of in an analogous sense as a continuation of the incarnation. But that expression is sacramental – it is achieved through the power, and with the limitations, of symbol. Therefore it is not a perfect, irreformable or unimpeachable presence. It is both divine self-expression and yet *semper reformanda*.

²⁷⁷ Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 111. Dulles notes here that the Church comes into being at the conclusion of the revelatory transaction: when God's self-gift (self-communication), in Christ, is received by the believing community. The Church is what comes into existence at the time of, and via, the event of revelation.

²⁷⁸ Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 159.

2. Beyond Vatican II

Concerning the sacramentality of the church, Dulles does not deviate substantially either from the theologians who served as precursors to the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council (the *Nouvelle Théologie* school in France and Karl Rahner in Germany, primarily), nor from the official teaching of the council in *Lumen Gentium*, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, *Gaudium et Spes* and *Ad Gentes*. But Dulles does insist on a sacramental ecclesiology that takes account of the Council documents as a whole, and in so doing perhaps expresses a more forceful doctrine than appears in certain individual passages of the conciliar documents. For example, while Dulles is well aware of the cautiously qualified language of *Lumen Gentium*'s opening article (the “*veluti sacramentum*” clause), he balances this with the knowledge that as the council progressed other less qualified statements appeared. The council documents refer to the sacramentality of the church ten times by Dulles' count: nine times explicitly, with one additional “passing reference,” as it was characterized by Walter Kasper, in *Lumen Gentium* 59.²⁷⁹ Of these only *Lumen Gentium* 1 includes the *veluti* qualifier; and this fact, taken together with the fact that this passage is the first mention made by the council Fathers of the sacramentality of the church, has subjected *Lumen Gentium* 1 and its use of ‘*veluti*’ to special scrutiny.

The text of the sentence at issue in *Lumen Gentium* 1, in its original Latin, reads:

“Cum autem ecclesia sit in Christo veluti sacramentum seu signum et instrumentum intimae cum Deo unionis totiusque generis humani unitatis, naturam missionemque suam

²⁷⁹ In addition to these most explicit references, there are other passages which speak of the sign-value or instrumentality of the church, or both, without employing the term “sacrament.” For example, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 2: “the liturgy daily builds up those who are within into a holy temple of the Lord. . . and thus shows forth the Church to those who are outside as a sign lifted up among the nations.”

universalem, praecedentium conciliorum argumento instans, pressius fidelibus suis et mundo universo declare intendit.”²⁸⁰ Among the numerous translations of this text, there is little variance of note other than the translation of the phrase “*veluti sacramentum*.” The word “*veluti*” itself is given to a very few variant translations. Cassell’s Latin Dictionary lists only three – “as,” “even as,” and “just as” – and from these three constructs only two distinct uses, which do, in fact, represent the breakdown of the two prominent schools of thought on the proper interpretation of the phrase in *Lumen Gentium*. The first use of *veluti* according to Cassell’s is “to introduce a simile;” the second, “to introduce an example.”²⁸¹

The first of these options can be seen in translations of *veluti sacramentum* as “like a sacrament,” “as a sacrament,” “as it were, a sacrament,” and so on. Maureen Sullivan for example, emphasizes this understanding fairly strongly, arguing that “the council fathers use the term *veluti* (“like”) in their discussion in the first paragraph [of *Lumen Gentium*]. The church is ‘like’ a sacrament.”²⁸² Richard Gaillardetz and Catherine Clifford, while not going quite so far as to emphasize ‘like’ in scare quotes, do devote a chapter to the first article of *Lumen Gentium*, and title it “The Church is Like a Sacrament.”²⁸³ Austin Flannery, in his very popular volume, translates the phrase as “...the Church, in Christ, is, as it were, a sacrament...”²⁸⁴ Herman Pottmeyer echoes this language and understanding in Peter Pham’s *The Gift of the Church*, claiming that “the

²⁸⁰ Norman Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol. 2, *Trent – Vatican II* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 849.

²⁸¹ *Cassell’s Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “velut (veluti).”

²⁸² Maureen Sullivan, OP, *The Road to Vatican II: Key Changes in Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007) 94-95.

²⁸³ Richard Gaillardetz and Catherine Clifford, *Keys to the Council: Unlocking the Teaching of Vatican II* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 47-56.

²⁸⁴ Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1988).

Church – so teaches the council – is in Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit as it were the sacrament of the kingdom of God,²⁸⁵ and in the same volume, Pedro Rodriguez interprets the phrase to mean “the Church ‘is in Christ as a sacrament.’”²⁸⁶ Translations such as these suggest a more reserved understanding of the phrase, suggesting that the council fathers intended to teach that the sacramentality of the church is a simile. In other words, according to such translations, the church is not really a sacrament – certainly not sacramental by nature – but rather has some characteristics in common with an actual sacrament, and ‘sacrament’ is a category that can be usefully applied, albeit allegorically, to describe certain aspects of the ecclesial reality.

The alternative line of thought on the translation of the passage results in more direct and forceful claims regarding the sacramentality of the church. Examples of this view include Stephen Schloesser who translates the phrase as teaching that the church is “in the nature of a sacrament”²⁸⁷ and J. M. Pasquier who, adopting a more literal, dictionary definition of *veluti*, perhaps, renders it simply *comme* (“as”): “l’Église «se reconnaît comme le sacrement de l’unité intime de tout le genre humain en lui-même et de son union avec Dieu».”²⁸⁸ Though “as” by itself does not perhaps indicate that Pasquier understands the council teaching to be that the church is an example of a sacrament, the phrase as a whole does do so. Pasquier says not that the church is “as a sacrament,” but rather that the church recognizes itself as a sacrament. It is a matter of

²⁸⁵ Hermann Pottmeyer, “The Episcopacy” in Peter Pham, ed., *The Gift of the Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 337-353 at 338-39.

²⁸⁶ Pedro Rodriguez, “Theological Method for Ecclesiology” in Peter Pham, ed., *The Gift of the Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 129-156 at 142.

²⁸⁷ Stephen Schloesser, *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 105. Interestingly enough, Schloesser references Austin Flannery here, though it is the 1987 study edition of Flannery’s *Vatican II* (Northport, NY: Costello), rather than the 1988 St. Paul edition quoted above.

²⁸⁸ Jean-Marie Pasquier, *L’Église comme sacrement: Le développement de l’idée sacramentelle de l’Église de Moehler à Vatican II* (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2008), 207.

self-identity, more along the lines, in English, of “to be” than “as”: the church recognizes itself to be a sacrament.

These and other similar translations suggest that the church is “a kind of sacrament,” rather than “kind of a sacrament” – a subtle but profound difference. A doctrine that the church is “a kind of sacrament,” suggests the church is one type of sacrament, while the liturgical rites we are more accustomed to consider under this term are another type of sacrament. It is a matter, really, of whether the council taught a sacramental ecclesiology, or not.

It is not surprising, therefore, to see Dulles come down strongly on the side of understanding this phrase in accordance with the latter alternative, as an example of a sacrament: “In a key text, the first article of its Constitution on the Church, Vatican Council II described the church as a kind of sacrament, that is to say, a sign and instrument of union with God in Christ (*LG I*).”²⁸⁹ In fact, Dulles himself does not give a direct translation of the phrase *veluti sacramentum*, but, as mentioned above, understands and receives the sacramental ecclesiology of Vatican II as a single, coherent teaching:

For Vatican II, the idea of the Church as sacrament is of foundational importance. Four times in *Lumen Gentium*. . . and six times in other documents . . . it so designates the Church. A sacrament is a symbolic expression of the great mystery of grace and salvation centered in Jesus Christ. For the New Testament and the fathers, Christ is the great sacrament or mystery of salvation, but Christ is not complete without the Church, which is his visible and effective presence on earth. Thus the Church may be seen, in Christ, as the encompassing sacrament.²⁹⁰

Translations which use *veluti* to designate “as a simile” rather than “as an example,” could be appropriate within the context of *Lumen Gentium* 1 by itself, if this

²⁸⁹ Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 111.

²⁹⁰ Dulles, “Nature, Mission and Structure of the Church,” 26-27.

were the full extent of the conciliar teaching on the subject. For Dulles, however, such translations do not do justice to the teaching of the council as a whole. When this initial, qualified statement is juxtaposed to other references asserting the sacramentality of the church without qualification, it is clear in Dulles' mind that the intent of the council was to present an understanding of the church as possessing a sacramental nature.²⁹¹

²⁹¹ After its initial teaching on the sacrament of the church in *Lumen Gentium* 1, in most instances the council did not hesitate to say, plainly, that the Church is “the universal sacrament of salvation,” or of unity. In addition to the teaching of article 1, already considered in some detail, *Lumen Gentium* describes the sacramentality of the church in three additional passages. In article 9, under the heading of “The People of God,” *Lumen Gentium* teaches that “*Deus . . . constituit ecclesiam, ut sit universis et singulis sacramentum visibile huius salutiferae unitatis*” (“God . . . has constituted the Church that it may be for one and all the visible sacrament of this saving unity”). Also, in what Grillmeier has singled out as “the important text of 48:2,” (*Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. I, ed. H. Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 139 n. 4) the document is even stronger in its assertion that the church is constituted by Christ as such a sacrament. According to this passage, Christ, after he had ascended, “sent his lifegiving Spirit down on his disciples and through him he constituted his body which is the church as the universal sacrament of salvation” (*Christus quidem exaltatus a terra omnes traxit ad seipsum; resurgens ex mortuis Spiritum suum vivificantem in discipulos immisit et per eum corpus suum quod est ecclesia ut universale salutis sacramentum constituit.*) Article 59, finally, makes reference to “*humanae salutis sacramentum . . . solemniter*,” though in a rather puzzling deviance Tanner renders “*sacramentum*” here as “mystery” rather than “sacrament.”

Otto Semmelroth (“The Role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church,” in Vorgrimler, *Commentary*, 1:285-296) also translates “*sacramentum*” as “mystery” at this point, even though he goes on later to speak of it as a parallel to the earlier statements in the document of the church as sacrament. It would seem that the change at this point has to do with this article’s Marian focus, as Semmelroth introduces his comments on the article by saying, “Here Mary’s connection with the mystery of Christ introduces her connection with the mystery of the Church.” (Vorgrimler, *Commentary*, I:289). However, Semmelroth does not hesitate to suggest that the phrase is an explicit reference to the sacramentality of the church. He comments a few lines later that, “When the Council speaks of proclaiming ‘the mystery of the salvation of the human race’, it does not refer merely to the mysterious character of salvation, but also to the concrete form which that mystery has assumed in the Church; thrice before (in articles 1, 9, and 38[sic – should be 48]) this Constitution has called the Church the sacrament of salvation. Mary is included in the solemn proclamation of that sacrament” (Vorgrimler, *Commentary*, I:289-90).

Sacrosanctum Concilium refers to the church as sacrament twice: in article 5, “the tremendous sacrament which is the whole church” (*est totius ecclesiae mirabile sacramentum*); and article 26, “the church, which is ‘the sacrament of unity’” (*ecclesiae, quae est, ‘unitatis sacramentum’*). This document introduces a nuance not encountered before, that the sacramentality of the church applies specifically to the totality of the ecclesial mystery – “the whole church.”

Two further references appear in *Gaudium et Spes*, 42 and 45. Article 42 quotes *Lumen Gentium* 1 directly, including the qualifier “*veluti*”: “*ecclesiae . . . sit ‘in christo veluti sacramentum seu signum et instrumentum.*” Of note, however, is that Tanner does not acknowledge the qualifier in this article. His English translation is simply: “it [the Church] is ‘a sacrament, or sign and instrument . . .’” The second reference, *Gaudium et Spes* 45, again quotes *Lumen Gentium* (no. 48), referring to the church as being “the universal sacrament of salvation” (*ecclesia est ‘universale salutis sacramentum’*). Finally, there are two additional references in *Ad Gentes* nos. 1 and 5. In the first, the church is described as “Sent by God to be ‘the universal sacrament of salvation’” (*divinitus missa ut sit ‘universale salutis sacramentum’*). The final

Beyond understanding the church as not only similar to sacrament, but actually sacramental, Dulles' sacramental ecclesiology expands on the explicit teaching of Vatican II in two other significant ways. First, Dulles draws out the implications and significance of the adjective "universal" which the council documents leave relatively undeveloped. Dulles emphasizes the missionary implications of a view of the church as "the universal sacrament of salvation," which "suggests that the Church must signify what it accomplishes, namely, the salvation of the nations."²⁹² In other words, there must be a real integrity between its reality – its life and mission – and its sign.

Therefore, Dulles concludes, the church must *exhibit* that same "salvific universalism" of which it is a sign, and the sacramental sign of the church must signify the universality of its mission. It is not overly difficult to see how the church accomplishes this salvation, via the proclamation of the Gospel leading to repentance and Baptismal cleansing and incorporation, but it is perhaps less clear how the church *signifies* this on-going accomplishment. In order to answer this, Dulles emphasizes the universality of the sign-value of the church, arguing that it must have what Dulles terms "semeiological catholicity," that is, "universality in its capacity as sign."²⁹³

Secondly, Dulles cautions that "Vatican II, by subordinating the institutional or hierarchical concept of the Church to others just mentioned, is partly responsible for the post-conciliar crisis. The council intensified the dissatisfaction of the Catholic intelligentsia with the hierarchical ecclesiology that had been dominant since the Counter

reference reinforces sacrament as an element of the very foundation of the church: "the Lord . . . founded His church as the sacrament of salvation" (*Dominus . . . ecclesiam suam ut sacramentum salutis fundavit*).

²⁹² Dulles, *Dimensions of the Church*, 51.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

Reformation, but failed to propose an alternative image that proved truly viable.”²⁹⁴ This is a rare criticism by Dulles of the conciliar teaching, and one with seemingly deep roots in Dulles’ ecumenical passion and sensibilities. “It seems important,” he concludes, “to continue the search” for an image of the church “that can help to overcome the existing polarizations and serve to integrate and channel the ecclesial experience of contemporary Catholics.”²⁹⁵ Dulles finds promise in two such models, or images, of the church: sacrament, and community of disciples.

3. Elements of Dulles’ Sacramental Ecclesiology

“A sacrament,” writes Dulles, “is, in the first place, a sign of grace.”²⁹⁶ It is a very special instance of sign, however, endowed with a profound power and efficacy, signifying and making present the grace of Christ. In the case of the sacrament of the church the sacramental sign is also, he clarifies, a sign constituted by the community. The symbolic element of the sacrament of the church, its existence as “sign and herald,” is “the corporate testimony of the church.”²⁹⁷ In making this claim, Dulles is not seeking to deny the organizational and structural elements of the church’s sacramental sign. Steeped as he was in the theology of the schools he certainly respects the traditional scholastic distinction within sacramental theology, between the visible sign (*sacramentum tantum*), and the life of grace gained by a properly disposed recipient of the sacrament (*res et sacramentum*).²⁹⁸ The *sacramentum tantum* according to this

²⁹⁴ Dulles, “Imaging the Church for the 1980s,” 126.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 126-127.

²⁹⁶ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 66.

²⁹⁷ Dulles, “Revelation in Recent Catholic Theology,” 362.

²⁹⁸ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 60, art. 1. Here Aquinas distinguishes between *sacramentum tantum* or “sacrament only” (the material sign of the sacrament), the *res tantum* or “reality

schema is the organizational church, while the *res et sacramentum* is the redemptive grace of Christ and the accomplishment of salvation. In naming the symbolic element of the ecclesial sacrament as “the corporate testimony of the church,” therefore, Dulles does not deny the organizational, but rather seeks to emphasize the necessity of the witness and ministry of the members of the community in order for the organizational elements of the church to function as an authentic and efficacious sign.

As a community of human beings susceptible to sin, such a view also points out the somber reality that the church, in its witness and ministry, has the capacity to be both sign, and countersign, of the grace of Christ in the world. The church, argues Dulles, can be “a place where the lordship of Christ is resisted and effectively denied. Only when it operates according to its true nature is it a place of grace and holiness, rendering Christ tangibly present.”²⁹⁹ The church is always a sign to some degree, but it is a truly effective sign, i.e., a sacrament, insofar as it goes beyond the role of messenger or herald, bearing witness to Jesus Christ “not only by what it says but also by what it does and is.”³⁰⁰ Furthermore, the communal character of the ecclesial sacrament leads Dulles to observe that it would not be a sacrament of Christ, “except for the human response of the faithful who compose it.” Unfortunately, that response is always deficient and imperfect, “and to that extent the sacrament itself is tarnished.”³⁰¹ Therefore the “sacramental vision” of the task of the church is to bring its members into full participation in the

only” (the reality signified, but not the signifier), and the *res et sacramentum* or “reality and sign” (the reality expressed, and received, through the sign).

²⁹⁹ Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, 20.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 46

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

reality made sacramentally present through it: “a life of faith in the God who has drawn near to us in love through Jesus Christ.”³⁰²

The sign of the church, is of course, no mere indicator, but symbol.

Unsurprisingly, Dulles argues for the necessity of its symbolic character if the church is to be understood as, or to function as, sacrament. He clarifies however, that the church is to be understood as a symbol “not in the weak sense of merely standing for an absent reality, but in the strong sense of making palpable the divine reality that is present and hidden within itself.”³⁰³ Closely aligned to this is the understanding that, as symbol, the material sign-element of the ecclesial sacrament is organic, and not simply chosen or constructed. A sacrament, Dulles teaches, is a sign “that comes into being because of the spiritual reality that is contained in it. The church, therefore, is present where, and only where, God’s irrevocable self-gift in his incarnate Son continues to come to expression in symbolic form.”³⁰⁴ Recognizing symbol as an underlying concept of the church’s sacramentality, Dulles applies the attributes of symbolic sign and modality to the reality of the church. The sacrament of the church, in this view, imparts its meaning by suggestion and evocation rather than explicit denotation. It works on all the human faculties, the whole person – imagination, will, emotions, and intellect – to alter perspectives, outlooks and understandings. It demands participation, and through participation imparts knowledge and awareness that becomes objective and explicit gradually, via repeated cycles of participation and reflection. Finally, the symbolic

³⁰² Ibid., 48.

³⁰³ Ibid., 36.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 49.

function of the ecclesial sacrament creates the possibility for the participant to “achieve a richer and more authentic penetration of the real.”³⁰⁵

A further element to Dulles’ sacramental ecclesiology that is often overlooked is the importance of the wisdom tradition. In his 1976 presidential address to the Catholic Theological Society of America, Dulles taught that the wisdom of God, the wisdom of the cross, as expounded by “theological luminaries from Justin and Irenaeus to Rahner and Lonergan,” is a necessary component of the sacramentality of the church. “If this tradition of wisdom were to die out,” Dulles warns, “the Church would have a mutilated existence: it would no longer appear in the world as the sacramental presence of him who is the Truth.”³⁰⁶ In its capacity as sign, the church signifies and represents this “divinely given wisdom”; as sacrament it also makes this wisdom present to the world.

Dulles also understands the sacramentality of the church to be discernible in the traditional “four marks” of the early creeds: one, holy, catholic and apostolic.³⁰⁷ The church must be one, must in some sense have unity as a characteristic of its true reality, or it could not be an efficacious sign, or symbol, of God’s redemptive work in Christ. Dulles, of course, is well aware of the extreme fragmentation within Christianity, but that does not negate the underlying point. He recognizes the great damage done by the current situation: “The divisions among Christians,” he admits, “impair the sacramental manifestation of that unity and consequently impede the life of grace,” however, they “do

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 47.

³⁰⁶ Dulles, “The Theologian and the Magisterium,” (Presidential Address), *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 31 (1976): 235-246 at 236.

³⁰⁷ Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, 49-50.

not destroy the given unity of the Church of Christ.”³⁰⁸ The grace of unity, prayed for by Christ and given to the church cannot be entirely thwarted by human failings.

Furthermore, the church is holy, for it lives by the power of God’s grace and is animated by the Holy Spirit. It is this grace that is expressed and realized in and through the ecclesial sacrament, which creates an environment of encounter with divine grace and invites its members to participate in it. The church, as sacrament, must also be universal in its mission of salvation. This is the great emphasis of Vatican II, which more than any other phrase, describes the sacramentality of the church as “universal sacrament of salvation.” The importance of the apostolicity of the church, finally, for its nature as true sacrament, is, of the four marks, most closely allied with the organizational aspects of the church. To be effective as a sacrament of Christ, Dulles writes, the church must exhibit a visible continuity to its origins (doctrine, ministry, and sacraments). However, the church must also take care to realize its apostolic continuity in such a way that institutional concerns are subordinated to pastoral, as the needs of different times and cultures require.

There are two additional elements to Dulles’ sacramental ecclesiology that arise as warnings against the abuse or over-zealous interpretation of the doctrine. The first of these concerns the potential to abuse the instrumentality of the church by separating it too far from its basis in the church’s sacramentality. Dulles warns that such abuse is possible by pushing this instrumentality to the point that it no longer aligns with its sacramental sign or the reality signified. As one example, Dulles points out that the notion of the church as instrument has been used or exploited at times by those who “look upon the church as a force of social transformation.” While Dulles recognizes the work of social

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 49.

transformation leading to a greater social justice is certainly an important and genuine element of the church's mission, it is not "adequate to define the Church wholly in function of its social or humanitarian contribution."³⁰⁹

Finally, perhaps the greatest danger of theological misstep associated with a sacramental ecclesiology is the potential to over-divinize the church and blur or ignore the crucial distinction between the reality of Christ and the reality of His church. Dulles speaks without hesitation of the church as "sacrament of Christ," and as expressing, in a certain sense, the divine reality that is behind or signified by, the sacramental sign. However, he is careful to maintain that the sacrament of the church is not coterminous with or equal to the sacrament of Christ. The church, for Dulles is a true sacrament, but he clarifies the analogous nature of the relationship between church and incarnation: "the Church, analogously, is a sacrament or symbolic reality which prolongs in time and space the event of God's merciful approach in Jesus."³¹⁰

4. "Anonymous Christianity" and Sacramental Ecclesiology

In his mature ecclesiology, so firmly does Dulles associate sacramentality with the nature of the church, that he sees a sacramental element even among those with the weakest relationship to the church, that is to say, those whom Rahner, among others,

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 4.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 30. The sensibility of analogy is consistently present, I believe, in Dulles' thought, though not always explicit in his writings. There are numerous passages where he speaks unreservedly of the church as "the sacrament of Christ," (for example, *Models of Revelation*, 226; *A Church to Believe In*, 46, 50, et. al.; *Models of the Church*, 63), or of the church, in its sacramentality, as effecting the presence of Christ (*Models of the Church*, 149, 181-82; *A Church to Believe In*, 94). At the same time, however, Dulles insists on a real distinction in statements such as "sacramental ecclesiology ...acknowledges that the symbolic expressions of grace are never adequate to the life of grace itself" (*Models of the Church*, 74).

would refer to as “anonymous Christians.”³¹¹ Dulles does not hesitate to infer an “anonymous Christianity” from the existence of such anonymous Christians; rather he considers it a logical extension of the doctrine of the anonymous Christian, and moves on to what he sees as the greater question: given an anonymous Christianity, what is its relationship to the church?

To answer this Dulles follows Edward Schillebeeckx, who emphasizes the unity of Christ and his body, the church, against those who would argue that the activity of the risen Christ transcends that of the church.³¹² Schillebeeckx, in turn, bases his arguments in part on the German exegete Henrich Schlier, who, taking this unity of Christ and church very seriously, asserts that “there is no sphere of being that is not also the Church’s sphere.” In fact, for Schlier, the church’s boundaries “are those of the universe.”³¹³ On the basis of these arguments Dulles recognizes two ways in which the church is present and active. While there is certainly an institutional and historical presence of the church, and the profession of the Christian faith “normally includes sacramental forms of worship,” nevertheless “there is an active presence of the Church even among those who have not yet been confronted with the forms of creed and cult [sacramental worship and life] historically deriving from Jesus Christ. In this connection we might perhaps speak of an ‘anonymous Church.’”³¹⁴ However, even if in such closely circumscribed cases the church could be called “anonymous,” this does not mean,

³¹¹ Karl Rahner described his theory of the anonymous Christian in several articles, including “Anonymous Christians,” in *Theological Investigations* 6, ch. 23, and “Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church” in *Theological Investigations* 12, ch. 9.

³¹² Edward Schillebeeckx, “The Church and Mankind,” in *Concilium* 1 (Glen Rock, NJ: Paulist Press, 1964), 68-101, esp. 81-91.

³¹³ Henrich Schlier, “Die Kirche nach dem Briefe an die Epheser,” in *Die Zeit der Kirche: exegetische Aufsätze und Vorträge* (Freiburg: Herder, 1956), 69.

³¹⁴ Dulles, *The Dimensions of the Church*, 13.

for Dulles, that it becomes invisible or loses its connection to created reality. It must retain its symbolic character. Because human persons are both corporeal and social beings, all of human personality – including the religious life – must necessarily be both visible and communal. Therefore, even where “‘anonymous Christianity’ is present, some kind of quasi-sacramental visibility will accompany it.”³¹⁵

Though Dulles suggests that it has come to be taken for granted that the salvific grace of Christ is operative outside the bounds of the institutional church,³¹⁶ it is not likewise taken for granted that accepting the notion of the anonymous Christian necessitates the acceptance also of an anonymous Christianity, much less an ‘anonymous church.’ Rahner notes that Henri de Lubac, for one, accepts the idea of anonymous Christians, but not an anonymous Christianity.

De Lubac’s difficulty with the notion of anonymous Christianity is that it fails to support what de Lubac considers the essential unity between the salvific and pedagogical work of Christ. Teacher and savior must be held together, he argues, because it was “the same man, Jesus, who taught and died.”³¹⁷ These two parts of the mission of Christ are characterized synonymously by de Lubac as: Teacher and savior, revelation and redemption, or gospel and church. He continues, “he who sacrifices himself for all is also he who demands unconditional adherence to his teaching and person,”³¹⁸ and emphasizes the point further, quoting from his own earlier work, *Catholicisme*: “God had no desire to merely salvage humanity like a wrecked ship: he wanted to put life in it, his own life . . .

³¹⁵Dulles, *Dimensions of the Church*, 13. Cf. “Revelation, Theology of,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 12, ed. Editorial Staff at the Catholic University of America (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 440-444 at 443 where Dulles also refers to the Bible as “quasi-sacramental.”

³¹⁶ See *Dimensions of the Church*, 12.

³¹⁷ Henri de Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery* (Shannon, Ireland: Ecclesia Press, 1969), 86; English translation of *Paradoxe et Mystère de l’Église* (Paris: Editions Montaigne, 1967).

³¹⁸ de Lubac, *Paradox*, 86.

Whence it is that humanity must actively cooperate in its own salvation. To the action of his sacrifice Christ has joined the objective revelation of his Person and the founding of his Church. Revelation and redemption are linked.”³¹⁹ Therefore one may not assert that salvation comes solely from Christ and at the same time maintain (as an *a priori* possibility) that this same salvation could by-pass the teaching of Christ: “Just as there is but one redemption, there is but one revelation, and the charge of communicating both the one and the other has been laid on one Church.”³²⁰

De Lubac accepts the possibility of ‘anonymous Christians’ because he considers it axiomatic that the grace of Christ is operative outside the visible, institutional structures of the church. In such cases, the link between the two elements being described is maintained, for the grace of Christ can reach beyond ‘the visible church’ and “the light of the gospel has penetrated” into the “diverse milieux” of such individuals. However, this does not hold true of an ‘anonymous Christianity,’ (which de Lubac seems to equate with an “implicit Christianity”) which amounts, in de Lubac’s mind, to a reduction of the revelation of Christ to a “surfacing of something [in us] that had always existed.”³²¹ “This would also lead *ipso facto* to the neglect of the actual history of mankind, to the setting up of some *a priori* notions as guidelines – notions that suppose that there is in practice no difference between religions, that they have a common relationship, that they may all equally play the role of ‘means’ or ‘ways of salvation’.”³²² The church, it seems, cannot be present anonymously, because it cannot be present without the new, and

³¹⁹ de Lubac, *Catholicisme*, 143.

³²⁰ de Lubac, *Paradox*, 87.

³²¹ de Lubac, *Paradox*, 88, with reference to “a new criticism of the expression” in Jacques Dournes, “Lecture de la déclaration par un missionnaire d’Asie” in *Vatican II, Déclaration sur les religions non chrétiennes* (Paris: Editions Du Cerf, 1967) 84-112.

³²² de Lubac, *Paradox*, 88.

particular, revelation given by Christ. If an individual is not aware of this revelation, in its concreteness, de Lubac sees no room to assert that the church has found expression there.

There is another sense, however, in which the term ‘anonymous Christianity’ is used beyond that considered by de Lubac, namely, the sense which understands the term as simply describing the phenomenon or existence of ‘anonymous Christians,’ and not as an additional, or greater, concept. This appears to be closer to the idea operative in Dulles’ comments. For Dulles, if there are anonymous Christians, that in itself constitutes an anonymous Christianity, which he seems to define as the collection of anonymous Christians, and this in turn must mean there is an anonymous church. Dulles does not conceive of such a church in opposition to, or even in distinction from, the institutional church, but rather as the ‘active presence’ of the visible, institutional church among those who are called ‘anonymous Christians.’ He insists that because the human person has corporeal and social attributes in addition to spiritual and individual ones, the structure of that person’s life and whole reality will exhibit, inevitably, both visible and social elements. Hence, if it is true (and contemporary theology takes it for granted, according to Dulles) that the grace of Christ is not confined to the institutional church but is operative far beyond its limits, then (so Schillebeeckx) “something of the Mystical Body [the church] is brought to visible realization, though only in a veiled manner. We have, as it were, a secret [not necessarily ‘invisible’] presence of the Church even where the spoken or written word of the gospel has not yet penetrated.”³²³

³²³ Dulles, *Dimensions of the Church*, 13-14, paraphrasing Schillebeeckx, “The Church and Mankind,” 87.

Dulles goes on to describe the way that non-Christian religious communities are formed when such anonymous Christians express their spiritual longing and intuitions through myths, rituals and symbols, then concludes (on his own authority, without further reference to Schillebeeckx) that “The doctrinal and cultic life which characterizes these other religions is an adumbration and even an incipient presence of the Church of Christ.”³²⁴ In this, I believe, we have reached the point where Dulles and de Lubac would simply disagree. In claiming that “In a larger sense we can say that He [Christ], as the Incarnate Word, crowns all the religions of the world”³²⁵ it seems Dulles is moving beyond the limits of what de Lubac would be willing to accept.

D. Significance of Dulles’ Sacramental Ecclesiology

Dulles developed his understanding of the sacramentality of the church not merely as an interesting idea, but within the context of a special usefulness for a more profound and adequate ecclesiology. His lifelong interest in ecumenical dialogue, especially in the issues stemming from the very different ecclesiologies among Protestants and Catholics, led him to a systematic investigation of the different conceptions of church operative in contemporary theology. The effort was not simply informational or descriptive; Dulles hoped that by presenting various ecclesiological approaches in some detail, with an even handed critique of their shortcomings and a balanced, generous embrace of their strengths, his readers would gain an insight into the complexity of the issue and an appreciation for elements of truth that existed outside their own paradigm. It was an attempt to open the minds of thinkers who had perhaps become

³²⁴ Dulles, *Dimensions of the Church*, 14.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*

so entrenched in their own traditions they were unable, more than unwilling, to see far enough beyond that tradition for dialogue to progress.

Though Dulles identified, described and critiqued five (and in the revised edition, six) distinct ecclesiologies in his *Models*, the heart of the ecclesiological question was the issue, going back to Reformation theology, of institutional vs. mystical conceptions of church. Dulles was unwilling to accept this as a legitimate dichotomy, and saw in the sacramental ecclesiology emerging from Vatican II and gaining some footing among Protestant thinkers, a way past it.

1. Special Prominence of Sacramental Ecclesiology in *Models of the Church*

The first edition of *Models of the Church*, appearing in 1974, sought to provide an organizing structure to the various ecclesiologies current in the theology of the day, and in so doing to draw out their points of contact, gleaning from each of them the elements in support of revelatory truth while neither accepting nor rejecting any outright. The point of the work was not in the end to build the elements of truth gleaned from each ‘model’ or category of ecclesial thought into a single, new and comprehensive understanding of the church. Dulles was well aware that, as divine mystery, such a feat is impossible to accomplish and ill-advised to attempt.³²⁶ Rather, the point was to provide for his readers a systematic evaluation and analysis of the whole range of ecclesial thought, such that those elements of truth found in the various ecclesiological traditions can be used appropriately in order to preserve the breadth and complexity of what has

³²⁶ Dulles addresses this specific point in his late-career memoir, *A Testimonial to Grace*, 118. He recalls, “Father Weigel had convinced me that the Church as a mystery could not be contained under any conceptual definition. Rather, it should be designated by a variety of images and metaphors, each of which captured certain limited aspects of the complex reality.”

been revealed about this divine mystery, and to point out certain erroneous, unhelpful or theologically questionable elements to be avoided.

While no new overarching ecclesiology was constructed or suggested by Dulles in this work, he did nonetheless indicate a clear preference for the potential of the sacramental model to help accomplish what has just been described. He was especially drawn to it because of its potential to synthesize the two most prevalent, yet often opposed, ecclesiological schools of thought – the institutional and the mystical or spiritual communion. In the 50th anniversary edition of *A Testimonial to Grace*, published in 1996, Dulles reviewed his efforts in *Models of the Church* and significantly concluded,

Some people read my *Models* book as though I were encouraging the reader to make a choice among the models, but my intention was rather the opposite. I wanted to make people aware of the unspoken assumptions that underlay their own options and to open them up to dialogue with Catholics who operated on different assumptions. Because all five models, as I tried to show, had both strengths and weaknesses, it would be a mistake to opt exclusively for any one.³²⁷

Even so, Dulles makes clear that his own ecclesiology aligns with the sacramental model: “If it were necessary to make a choice, I would have selected the sacramental model, which seemed to have the greatest potentiality for integrating within itself the strong points of the other four models.”³²⁸

Even the position of the sacramental model within the presentation of the original text’s five models is significant. It is highlighted as a potential source of synthesis firstly by its presentation as the third model – two preceding it, and two following. It is unlikely that this is accidental or incidental. It seems more likely that it is presented in this place

³²⁷ Dulles, *A Testimonial to Grace*, 118.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

because of the use Dulles makes of it to synthesize to a significant degree the first two models presented, and construct a contextual framework within which to better understand and appreciate the two that follow. The institutional and the ‘mystical communion’ models are essentially the two extremes of emphasis within the continuum of ecclesiologies considered. At one end of the spectrum is an overemphasis on the visible character of the church (the institutional model), which suffers from an inadequate appreciation for the spiritual element that constitutes the communion of faith. At the other end of the spectrum is the ‘mystical communion’ model which, while correcting the shortcomings of the institutional, risks constructing a church that the world cannot readily find or identify. Without a visible expression in the world the church is severely hindered in its ability to evangelize and to worship as a community, or to fulfill its mission to be a light to the world.

The sacramental model comes third, after this difficulty has been carefully laid out. Dulles uses the sacramental model in two ways: first, as a reason why the church must have both an institutional/visible and a mystical/spiritual reality; second, as a demonstration that it is possible to hold these two potentially opposing views in fruitful tension. Understanding the church as sacramental by nature, not merely the administrator of sacramental rites, emphasizes the necessity of both the institutional and mystical ecclesial elements, and furthermore highlights the requirement that the two elements cooperate in order to bring the grace of salvation to the world, rather than oppose each other. As a sacrament, the church must have the quality of symbol – a tangible, perceivable, and efficacious sign. It must be a symbol that is readily identifiable, evocative, concrete and polyvalent. The church must also, however, be an instrument of

invisible grace; it must be, as *Lumen Gentium* puts it, both sign and instrument of the unity of all humanity, and of humanity with God.³²⁹ It must accomplish or effect what it symbolizes, and thus must manifest itself both as mystical communion of believers and as identifiable symbol.

But the sacramental model is useful for more than just suggesting or demonstrating the necessity of holding these two elements in harmony. Dulles also presents this model as an accurate, even if not fully adequate, description of the mystery of the church. Whereas the institutional and mystical communion models were presented as describing one element of the church's complex and mysterious reality while neglecting another important element, in his presentation of the sacramental model of the church, Dulles suggests that the concept of 'sacrament' has the potential to describe the very nature of the church. In other words, while the church *contains* institutional and mystical communion elements, the church *is* a sacrament. This is not to suggest that the concept of sacrament exhausts the reality of the church, or that the two are co-terminus; only that the category of sacrament has a much greater potential as a basis of an adequate ecclesiology because sacrament does not suffer from the same inherent deficiencies as do the first two models, taken in isolation. Sacrament, as an efficacious symbol, is a reality with an inexhaustible depth of meaning, making it particularly apt to characterize a divine mystery.

This represents an important departure from the presentation of the first two models. While Dulles notes the strengths and benefits of viewing the church as institutional and as mystical communion, he presents these models as one-dimensional

³²⁹ *Lumen Gentium* 1.

and fundamentally deficient when considered in isolation. He presents shortcomings and criticisms of the sacramental model as well, of course, but the deficiencies of the sacramental model are qualitatively different. Keeping in mind the inexhaustible depth of meaning inherent in symbol, and the efficacious nature of sacrament, the sacramental view of the church is capable, in theory, of sufficiently making present to the believer, in experience and knowledge, the mystery of the church. Practically speaking, the sacramental model is substantively aided by the other models, but of itself, sacrament by nature is particularly well suited to manifest and disclose divine mystery. For this reason, in the revised edition of the text Dulles, reflecting on his original presentation, concluded that the sacramental model “seems to have exceptional capacities for incorporating what is sound in each of the other four models.” Thus, he continued, in the original text he “hinted at the possibility of using that model as the basis for a systematic ecclesiology.”³³⁰

The revised edition of *Models of the Church*, appearing in 1992 contained an additional chapter, and an additional model. Based on a brief comment in Pope John Paul II’s *Redemptor Hominis*, Dulles introduced “community of disciples” as an additional ecclesiological category, and suggested this idea as a possible solution to “harmonize the differences among the five previously described” models.³³¹ However, he is also careful to make clear that this concept of the church “is not intended to take the place of all other images and descriptions.”³³² Even in the face of this clear embrace of the discipleship model, however, Dulles’ affinity for a sacramental ecclesiology remained

³³⁰ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 206.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 206.

³³² *Ibid.*, 222.

firm. He endorsed the sacramental model, specifically, for its ability to highlight “the values and limitations of the discipleship model,” and stressed that “the same characteristics that make the Church the sacrament of Christ” – institution by Christ, visible representation of Christ, real presence of Christ in the Church, and the efficacious nature of that presence – “qualify it to be called the community of disciples.”³³³

2. Sacramental Ecclesiology as a Tool for Critiquing Other Ecclesiologies

Dulles’ emphasis on the sacramental model, and his particular affinity for it, can be explained in large part by the increasingly central role of symbol in his theology as a whole. From just after the close of Vatican II, in his research and writings on revelation as well as on the church, symbol became an important category for understanding the operation of divine grace in the church and in the communication of God’s self to humanity.³³⁴ Understanding sacrament as a particular case of symbol (an efficacious symbol, which symbolizes and makes present a divine reality), first, and applying this understanding of sacrament to the church’s nature such that the church is seen as the foundational sacrament, second, provided Dulles with the conceptual and theological categories to critique the deficiencies of the other models while still genuinely appreciating the important and necessary elements they add to a rich and full ecclesiology.

In order for the church to be sacramental in nature, it must operate as both sign and instrument. It must be tangible, perceptible, active and effective. In critiquing the

³³³ Ibid., 223.

³³⁴ “Symbol, Myth and the Biblical Revelation,” came out in *Theological Studies* 27, no. 1 in March of 1966, and represented some significant research into the concept and function of symbol. Dulles continued to research the concept and incorporate his findings into many, if not most, of his publications on Revelation, sacraments, and the Church for the remainder of his career.

institutional model, taken by itself, Dulles writes “considered as a bare institution, the church might be characterized as just an empty sign. It could be going through formalities and be a hollow shell rather than a living community of grace.”³³⁵ The institutional model preserves especially well the sign-value of the church, but it is an empty sign, not a symbol, and even less a sacrament. On the other hand, the mystical communion model is well suited to emphasize the active work of the Spirit within the community, the effects of grace in the church, and the power of God’s presence in the world, but in this case there is no sign at all. But grace, Dulles notes, seeks an “appropriate form of expression. . . . Wherever the grace of Christ is present, it is in search of a visible form that adequately expresses what it is.” Furthermore, “something of the Church as sign will be present wherever the grace of God is effectively at work.”³³⁶ In the institutional model there is an empty sign; in the mystical communion model there is active grace but no expression of that grace. The sacramental model makes room for both, justifies both, in fact demands both. Dulles concludes, “sacramental ecclesiology supports the best features of the previous two models while solving problems that prove intractable on either of these other two. . . . A particular advantage of this model is that it can, without neglecting the importance of the visible Church, give ample scope to the workings of divine grace beyond the limits of the institutional Church.”³³⁷

The final two models also benefit from an appraisal through the lens of the sacramental model. The herald model emphasizes the Word of God as forming, even constituting, the church. The defining mission of the church, according to this model, is

³³⁵ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 70.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

to proclaim the Word which it has received. Dulles makes note of the many strengths of this model – its strong New Testament pedigree, its clarity of ecclesiological mission, its emphasis on the power of the Word “as expression of the person, as address, as bond of communion between persons in dialogue.”³³⁸ However, there is a strong critique of this view that the sacramental, again, can help provide passage past. Dulles cautions, “it is not enough to speak of the word of God, for Christianity stands or falls with the affirmation that the Word has been made flesh.”³³⁹ In certain versions of the herald, or proclamation, model of the church, which are pushed too far, perhaps, it begins to inherit the problems of the communion model, that the grace of the Word finds insufficient expression in the created order. The sacramental model’s insistence on the necessity of symbol can serve as a corrective in such cases.

Finally, the servant model sees the church as “carrying on the mission of Christ . . . to serve the world by fostering the brotherhood of all men.”³⁴⁰ Like the herald model, the servant model benefits from a sacramental ecclesiology, as the service which the church gives to the world, the work it does to bring freedom, justice, charity and hope to the world and to further the presence of the Kingdom of God, is a particularly potent sign. But the sacramental model emphasizes the church’s character as instrument as well as of sign, and in its instrumentality also, exhibits the mission of service to the world as well as its mission of transformation (conversion). The instrumentality of the church is seen in

³³⁸ Ibid., 85.

³³⁹ Ibid., 85.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 91-92.

its efforts to promote the common good of the whole human race, regardless of whether individual members of that community express faith in Christ.³⁴¹

However, like the institutional model, the servant model can be criticized for an insufficient emphasis on the church as an instrument of grace. Just as the church must be more than an “empty sign,” so also it must be more than a servant to the world. It must also be an agent of grace, conversion, faith, and salvation for the world as well as an agent of justice and the Kingdom of God. The sacramental model once again can serve as a tool by which to both appreciate the truth of the servant model, and to incorporate it into an even greater truth.

While *Models of the Church* was enthusiastically received by the theological community, both as a teaching tool and as a lucid and useful way of thinking through the nature of the church especially as it exists as an ecumenical problem, there were some who felt it gave inadequate expression to one or another of the models, or introduced more confusion than clarity. For example, Jerome Theisen wondered if the reality of recent “abuses” attributed to the institutional model caused Dulles to focus on this model’s shortcomings and undersell its benefits.³⁴² Richard McBrien expressed some frustration that there was not a more systematic critique of the institutional model and that the work was so evenhanded that the reader had to piece together Dulles’ own thoughts from hints and intimations.³⁴³ Stephen McKenna felt the book would only add

³⁴¹ The book of Acts includes some clear examples of the early church working to effect social justice and inclusivity without first demanding or attending to an individual’s conversion (its eschatological mission): chapter 3 recounts Peter and John healing a cripple without first attending to his conversion; likewise, chapter 6 describes the establishment of the diaconate for service to the neglected widows of the Hellenists, addressing an issue of social injustice outside of the context of conversion.

³⁴² Jerome Theisen, “Models of the Church,” *Worship* 48, no. 8 (Oct, 1974): 500-501.

³⁴³ Richard P. McBrien, “Models of the Church,” *National Catholic Reporter* (March 29, 1974): 7-8.

to the existing “state of confusion” in which theology finds itself.³⁴⁴ However, Dulles remained committed to his presentation of these models, including his own sacramental ecclesiology, in *Models of the Church*, leaving it essentially unchanged in future editions except for the addition of the “community of disciples” model to reflect a more recent theology.

Concluding Remarks

Building upon his conviction of the symbolic nature of reality, and driven by his desire for open and fruitful ecumenical dialogue, Dulles developed a deep commitment to a sacramental understanding of the nature of the church. As his ecclesiology grew to maturity, sacrament came to stand, for him, at the very heart of the ecclesial reality – a reality which existed to point the world toward, and manifest in the world, the saving grace of Christ. For Dulles, sacrament was not merely something the church did, but was an accurate and profound, if never fully adequate, description of what the church *is*. This sacramental understanding comprised all of the efficacy and communicative powers of the symbol, and the ontological expression of divine grace that is the special purview of sacrament.

When the topic of the sacramentality of the church is taken up again in chapter four, below, this particular combination of the evocative and communicative power of the symbol, and ontological relation to the grace of Christ that characterizes, for Dulles, the communal reality of ‘church,’ will be brought into conversation with those same powers of symbolic communication as they operate in service to the achievement of revelation. Before that discussion can proceed, however, it is necessary to look closely at the

³⁴⁴ Stephen McKenna, “Models of the Church,” *Best Sellers* (May 1, 1974): 67.

application of Dulles' symbolic realism to the mysterious phenomenon of divine revelation, and the particular theology of revelation that emerges – its origins, structure, benefits and challenges.

CHAPTER III:
REVELATION THEOLOGY OF AVERY DULLES:
REVELATION AS SYMBOLIC MEDIATION

A. Introduction

The understanding of revelation as mediated via symbolic communication must certainly rank among Dulles' most insistent claims. This approach takes center stage in *Models of Revelation* but it is also readily apparent in his publications on the theology of revelation throughout his long career.³⁴⁵ In the fiftieth anniversary edition of his spiritual autobiography, *A Testimonial to Grace*, Dulles himself emphasizes the importance of the symbolic communication model within *Models of Revelation*:

After setting forth five models in current theology, and analyzing their strengths and weaknesses, I proceeded to develop my personal positions by using the concept of "symbolic communication" as a dialectical tool. I pointed out that although symbol plays a role in all the models, the concept of symbol differs from one model to the next. I argued in favor of symbolic realism, and rejected the predominantly subjectivist notion of symbol current in what George Lindbeck describes as the "experiential-expressivist" school of thought. I therefore found myself able to affirm the predominantly symbolic character of revelation without minimizing the historical and doctrinal aspects that were so prominent in Catholic teaching.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁵ Dulles' interest in and appreciation for the importance of symbol for understanding the communication of divine revelation can be traced as far back as the early 1950s. During this time, under the guidance of Fr. Gustave Weigel at Woodstock College, Dulles began reading Paul Tillich from whom he "first learned the importance of symbol for the theology of revelation" (cf. Dulles, *A Testimonial to Grace*, 104). This guided reading supported the publication of "Paul Tillich and the Bible," in which the concept of symbol as an instrument of revelation was given an early and tentative but nonetheless serious debut.

A symbolic communication approach to revelation was still prominent in *The Craft of Theology* and in the 1996 revision of *A Testimonial to Grace*, and is a discernible subtext for publications well into the last decade of his career, e.g., "Catholic Doctrine: Between Revelation and Theology," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 54 (1999): 83-91 and "Faith and Reason: From Vatican I to John Paul II," in *The Two Wings of Catholic Thought: Essays on Fides et Ratio* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 193-208.

³⁴⁶ Dulles, *A Testimonial to Grace*, 126. In rejecting "what George Lindbeck describes as the 'experiential-expressivist' school of thought," Dulles is not necessarily rejecting the theologians Lindbeck himself has included in this school of thought. Dulles is rejecting the approach which Lindbeck has named 'experiential-expressivist,' but has his own ideas concerning what theologians belong to this school. For

This late-career reflection on his earlier work, and the reasoning for the shape eventually given to his use of symbol in relation to revelation, sheds light on the enduring importance Dulles placed on symbolic realism for any theology of revelation. This position was the fruit of decades of reflection and study, but also of some important academic influences harking back to the beginning of his theological career.

B. Origin of Dulles' Revelation Theology

In the early 1950s, during his theological studies at Woodstock College, Dulles found a mentor in Fr. Gustave Weigel, who not only taught many of the subjects Dulles was interested in, but also served as a spiritual and intellectual guide outside the classroom. Weigel taught fundamental theology and ecumenism, and undertook to guide Dulles in additional reading on a number of subjects outside of course assignments including, at Dulles' request, a reading program specifically targeting Protestant theology.³⁴⁷ Prominent among the Protestant theologians Weigel introduced Dulles to was Paul Tillich, whom Weigel considered to be "the most brilliant theologian on the American scene," and Dulles was particularly drawn to Tillich's presentation of the importance of symbol for a theology of revelation.³⁴⁸

As early as 1956 Dulles began to explore this relationship formally in an article for *Theological Studies* entitled "Paul Tillich and the Bible."³⁴⁹ Dulles states his case forcefully early on, via an approving presentation of Tillich's approach to symbol:

example, Dulles does not follow Lindbeck in attributing a subjectivist notion of symbol to the theology of symbol developed by Karl Rahner.

³⁴⁷ Carey, *Avery Cardinal Dulles, SJ*, 120-121. Carey relates an anecdote about Dulles requesting Weigel guide him in reading Protestant theology, and Weigel needing some convincing that Dulles' reasons were sound.

³⁴⁸ Dulles, *A Testimonial to Grace*, 104; Carey, *Avery Cardinal Dulles, SJ*, 122-123.

³⁴⁹ *Theological Studies* 17, no. 3 (1956): 345-367.

“While human language, in its ordinary propositional use, cannot serve as a vehicle of revelation, there is a peculiar kind of speech which is appropriate to the task. This is symbolism, which Tillich defines as the use of finite materials in order to create a revelatory situation.”³⁵⁰ Dulles recognizes that in the theology of Tillich, “myth and symbol are the only way in which revelation can be communicated.”³⁵¹ It is not hard to discern in this appraisal the seminal form of Dulles’ own consistent claim that all revelation is mediated, and as his theology developed, mediated specifically by symbol. Dulles is careful not to follow Tillich too far, being well aware of the criticisms and limitations of his theology as overly “naturalist,” even tending toward a “blanket rejection of the supernatural order . . . clearly unacceptable to the Catholic.”³⁵² Nonetheless, he found great merit in Tillich’s understanding of the sign-value of all revelatory events, an understanding that formed an important component of Dulles’ own emerging revelation theology.

Tillich, of course, was not the only theologian or philosopher of the time to recognize and emphasize the importance of the symbolic order for human communication, nor was he the only such thinker to significantly influence Dulles’ theology of revelation.³⁵³ After finishing his theologate at Woodstock in 1957, Dulles

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 348. Reference is to Tillich’s *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Reason and Revelation, Being and God*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 238-244.

³⁵¹ Dulles, “Paul Tillich and the Bible,” 349.

³⁵² Ibid., 362.

³⁵³ Dulles read widely from authors publishing studies on the role of myth, symbol, and the function of symbol within communication or language – especially religious language. Some of the more influential studies for his own publications include Stephano Wisse, *Das Religiöse Symbol: Versuch einer Wesendeutung in Auseinandersetzung mit modernen Autoren* (Essen: Ludgerus-Verlag, 1963); Austin Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (Westminster, England: Dacre Press, 1948), and *A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St. John’s Apocalypse* (Westminster, England: Dacre Press, 1963); John Knox, *Myth and Truth: An Essay on the Language of Faith*, Richard Lectures, University of Virginia, 1963-64 (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1964); Brevard S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1960); Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious*

was sent to Rome to begin doctoral studies at the Gregorian University. While there he became acquainted with the work of René Latourelle on the theology of revelation, and brought some of Latourelle's notes on revelation with him for use in his own classes on revelation when he returned to teaching at Woodstock.³⁵⁴

In 1963 Latourelle published a magisterial study on divine revelation, *Théologie de la Révélation*,³⁵⁵ which Dulles characterizes as “the fruit of a decade of unremitting labor.”³⁵⁶ In residence at the Gregorian from 1958-1960, Dulles' would certainly have been familiar with the contours and development of Latourelle's thought on revelation theology, including the role within it of symbol and the symbol's unique capacity for communication. Thus when Dulles published “The Theology of Revelation” in 1964, just a year after Latourelle's monograph was published, he was well prepared to draw

Symbolism (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism,” in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 86-107 at 103 ff., and more specifically concerning what Dulles terms “symbolico-realist” philosophy (a philosophy he would later come to relate his own thought to closely), *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, vol. 2, *Mythical Thought* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955).

In Dulles' 1980 article, “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” *Theological Studies* 41, no. 1 (March 1980): 51-73 at 55 – an immediate precursor to the related material in *Models of Revelation* – he provides a list of “esteemed thinkers” that have been particularly influential in their respective representations of the role of symbol in revelation: Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, Mircea Eliade, Paul Ricoeur, Langdon Gilkey, Ray Hart, John Macquarrie, Louis Dupré and Gregory Baum. In the course of the article, however, he also draws from a number of other thinkers who made specific contributions to the use of symbol for theology: Phillip Wheelwright introduced Dulles to the distinction between “tensive symbols” and “steno-symbols” in his *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1962); John Hick, in a collection of essays titled *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), raised concerns for the potential of the symbolic-mediation approach to compromise revelatory truth-claims; Nathan Mitchell argued strongly for the participatory quality of the symbol in his essay “Symbols Are Actions, Not Objects,” *Living Worship* 13, no. 2 (February 1977): 1-4; Susanne K. Langer, considering the role of religious symbols for the philosophy of knowledge in *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), emphasized especially the polyvalence of religious symbols; and Rudolph Otto, whose book, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), points out the power of symbolic language to effect a positive reaction even from negative (apophatic) expressions.

³⁵⁴ Carey, *Avery Cardinal Dulles, SJ*, 166-167.

³⁵⁵ Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1963. Republished in English as *Theology of Revelation, Including a Commentary on the Constitution “Dei Verbum” of Vatican II* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1966).

³⁵⁶ Dulles, “The Theology of Revelation,” *Theological Studies* 25, no. 1 (March 1964): 43-58 at 45.

upon Latourelle to consider more explicitly the relationship of symbol to revelation as it is operative in both Protestant and Roman Catholic theology. In this essay Dulles concludes that “the question of symbolic language . . . ought to find a place in any full treatise on revelation.”³⁵⁷ Though Dulles’ own position on the question is at this point still nascent, his appreciation for not only the suitability of symbol to communicate revelation, but also its importance (if not necessity) is evident in comments such as, “Hence we must ask whether the supernaturally given images in Scripture and tradition may not have an irreplaceable role in the communication of God’s word to man.”³⁵⁸

By the time of Dulles’ first major publication on revelation, his 1969 book *Revelation Theology: A History*, the importance of symbol had become a significant influence on his understanding of the phenomenon of revelation, though still presented in somewhat tentative form.³⁵⁹ In the work’s introduction Dulles cautions that revelation, “as a concrete and mysterious self-communication of the divine, cannot be circumscribed by any definition. It is apprehended as much through significant facts, intuitions of value, and symbolic imagery as through clear and distinct ideas,”³⁶⁰ and in summarizing the conception of revelation emerging from the New Testament adds “Christ reveals not only by his preaching and teaching (Mk. 1:14f.; In. 6:63.14:10), but also by his symbolic actions, such as cleansing the Temple, embracing little children, cursing the barren fig tree, and the like.”³⁶¹

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 56.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 57.

³⁵⁹ Dulles, *Revelation Theology: A History* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969).

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 11.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 28.

With the publication of “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation” in 1980, Dulles presented a more mature and confident doctrine, evincing a notable growth in both precision and forcefulness in the explicit assertion that all revelation is mediated, and mediated specifically through symbol.³⁶² It is this conviction that forms the backdrop of his most developed presentation of the subject, his 1983 *Models of Revelation*. Indeed, the opening paragraphs of Chapter IX, “Symbolic Mediation,” repeat almost verbatim the confident assertion first appearing in the 1980 article: “revelation never occurs in a purely interior experience or an unmediated encounter with God. It is always mediated through symbol.”³⁶³ A few pages later he reiterates, perhaps even more forcefully, “the symbolic theory holds that there is no revelation apart from the created signs by which it is mediated.”³⁶⁴ Though later writings do not contain further developments of such significance, the importance of symbol, especially for mediating the divine mystery, remained a central concern and continued to influence Dulles’ thought to the end of his career.³⁶⁵

C. Structure of Dulles’ Revelation Theology

Given this brief sketch of the origins and development of Dulles’ theology of revelation, it is clear that any presentation of its structure must center principally on its relationship to symbol and the specific powers and modalities that render symbol such an important element of the revelatory reality for Dulles. But symbol is not the only

³⁶² Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 55-56.

³⁶³ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 131.

³⁶⁴ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 148.

³⁶⁵ For example, in “Handing on the Faith Through Witness and Symbol,” 300, Dulles advises that the believer who wishes to focus attention on the “inaccessible light” in which God dwells can only hope to do so through symbolic communication; consider also the prominent role played by symbol in his larger theological system as described in the 1992 article “From Symbol to System: A Proposal for Theological Method,” and *The Craft of Theology*.

significant element of Dulles' thought regarding divine revelation. Before launching into a more detailed and systematic consideration of the role of symbol, it will be of benefit to establish a base in two other important aspects. First, when Dulles speaks of divine revelation he is speaking, more often than not, of an event of encounter between God and his people. There are instances where revelation takes a nounal form, but even so the operative concept for Dulles is active encounter that leaves the believer mysteriously enriched. Secondly, before investigating the role of symbol in a symbolic-communication theology of revelation directly, some consideration of the nature of revelation as simply communication is in order. From this, then, it will be possible to proceed more fruitfully to an informed consideration of revelation as an event of communication accomplished via symbolic efficacy.

1. Revelation as Content and Event

The conclusions of the previous section that revelation does not exist apart from the mediation of the symbol suggests that the mediation accomplished via the revelatory symbol is in fact what is to be understood by the term "revelation." At the very least, true "revelation" is somehow *in* the symbolic mediation in such a profound sense that the absence of symbolic mediation also *de facto* precludes the occurrence or achievement of revelation. But to speak of an "occurrence of revelation," or even of "symbolic mediation" is to speak in terms of an action, or event. "Symbolic mediation" is not a noun, it is a verb – something that is done, or accomplished by the symbol. And yet, while on the one hand there is a certain intuitive sense that revelation is of this active character, on the other hand there is a further intuitive sense that the character of

revelation is objective in nature. It is common to encounter nounal phrases such as “revelatory truth,” or “the revelation of God.”

Thus while it must be admitted that revelation necessarily has the character of event or encounter, it must simultaneously be maintained that this same concept comprises some real subject matter – a new awareness, knowledge or truth not previously accessible – that is communicated to the human intellect. The question that remains is whether, and if so how, revelation can or even must be understood as such an accomplished act, even when it is considered strictly from the perspective of the revelatory content. Dulles describes this content in terms of revelation as divine self-disclosure (a category to be explored further, below): “The essential content of revelation is . . . mystery, the mystery of God’s being and of his redemptive plan for the world.”³⁶⁶ But for all the theological depth and power of such a view of revelatory content, it remains abstract and lacks the concreteness necessary to really guide and nurture the spiritual life.

In “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” the article in which Dulles first presents a developed “symbolic approach” to revelation, setting the stage for the more comprehensive analysis to follow in *Models of Revelation*, he clarifies that for the purposes of his symbolic approach he is assuming that “the content of revelation is always God, not simply in Himself but in relation to our world and to ourselves.”³⁶⁷ This seems natural, for as an utterly simple being, if God is to reveal or communicate anything at all it must be the very essence of the divine mystery. God can offer himself, or not, it would seem, but not partially. And yet, the experience of revelation at times runs

³⁶⁶ Dulles, “Handing on the Faith Through Witness and Symbol,” 300.

³⁶⁷ Dulles, “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 51-73.

contrary to such an assertion. The Christian Tradition has long guarded a collection of propositional truths, the “deposit of faith,” which are for many the very paradigm of divine revelation, and yet clearly such dogmas cannot contain the mystery of God *in toto*. They seem, rather, to be the communication of some portion of the divine mystery that has been given, specifically, in humanly comprehensible language. The propositional view of revelation constitutes the first of Dulles’ five models, and though he finds it inadequate in some important respects he is also keenly aware of its contributions to the life of faith.³⁶⁸ Indeed, it seems particularly well suited to overcome the difficulties presented by the abstractness of the notion that revelatory content is the mystery of God. Dulles summarizes that the propositional notion of revelatory content has the “striking advantages of . . . practical fruitfulness for the unity and growth of the Church. It encourages loyalty to foundational documents and traditions of the Church and thus gives the members a clear sense of identity.”³⁶⁹

Even so, it would seem that whatever one might conceive of as revelatory content is not yet revelation properly so-called until it has been communicated, and is not truly communicated until it has been received. It is not divine self-*disclosure* until it is comprehended; not properly an *unveiling* unless and until it is beheld, however partially, by the target of the revelation. This is not to deny the reality of revelatory content; only to emphasize that while there is, certainly, some matter that can legitimately be called revelatory content, that content is not – with the single glaring exception of the revelation given in the person of Christ – the essence of the divine mystery. Rather, for content to merit the adjective “revelatory” it must be viewed from the receiving end of the

³⁶⁸ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 46-52.

³⁶⁹ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 47.

revelatory transaction. What is offered in the gratuitous divine unveiling is, without doubt, the very wholeness of the divine mystery; but the offer is not yet revelation. What is received by the finite human intellect or spirit is necessarily something less. What we, as humans, know involves a content, a “something” that is intellectually or spiritually apprehended, understood, made part of us. Thus revelation involves a transferal of this knowledge content from revealer to receiver – a communication of knowledge at its most basic and fundamental level. What is revealed, disclosed, manifested, etc., is not to be understood as revelation unless, and to the extent that, it is received in the understanding of the one to whom it is given – unless, in other words, the communication of the content of the revelation has been accomplished.

Revelation as the self-expression of the divine, as divine self-disclosure, requires no mediation, symbolic communication, or accommodation of any kind in order to be offered. But if it is to be received, it must, as St. Thomas famously posits, be received in the manner of all knowledge, that is, according to the mode of the knower.³⁷⁰ It is in this human response to the divine self-gift, the receipt of the content of revelation, that revelation, through the mediation of symbolic communication, becomes an event in human perspective. The mystery of God, offered as revelation, *becomes* revelation when the believer approaches a revelatory symbol allowing it to mediate something of that mystery, and receiving it in faith:

The dogmas of Christian faith – such as the Incarnation, the atoning death of Jesus, and his resurrection – articulate what the community of the disciples discerned as taking place in the event of Jesus Christ. The mere fact of Christ, taken as an objectively certifiable occurrence, is not yet revelation, but when met by a believing interpretation which captures its true significance, it becomes revelation in a special and altogether unique

³⁷⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Part I, Q. 12, art. 4.

sense. God's self-revelation in Jesus therefore comes to fulfillment only in the human discovery whereby it is received.³⁷¹

For Dulles the operative revelatory paradigm is clearly that of a transaction, or accomplished act: the divine essence becomes revelation in the event of communication accomplished by submission to revelatory symbols in faith. For this reason Dulles can insist that symbols are historically bound, or situated.³⁷² Revelation achieves itself in human events, and such events occur in particular times and places. The symbols through which revelation is mediated in the process of its achievement are therefore also

³⁷¹ Dulles, "Revelation and Discovery," *Theology and Discovery: Essays in Honor of Karl Rahner, S. J.*, ed. William J. Kelley, S. J. (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980), 1-29 at 23. In "Dulles and Aquinas on Revelation," *The Thomist* 52, no. 3 (July, 1988), 445-471, Thomas Hughson appeals to Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologica*, Secunda Secundae, 173, 2) to critique "a tendency in *Models of Revelation* to describe the symbolic mediation of revelation as if it was actually symbolic and revelatory apart from the mind of a recipient" (458). Dulles' symbolic approach to revelation, according to this critique, does not adequately account for the element of judgment in the human reception of the symbol. Hughson contends that, according to Aquinas, it is this judgment, enabled by divine enlightenment, that constitutes revelation. For Aquinas in this reading, there are two elements of revelation, one or both given by God in a particular revelatory event: the species (something sensed, imagined or thought), and a divine enlightenment that enables the prophet or other recipient of revelation to render a judgment not as to what it *is*, but as to what it *means*. "If anything could be said to mediate revelation for Aquinas it would be the representations or species," says Hughson, "not the judgment. The light given for judgment could not mediate because of itself it is not content but power to reach the truth in what is known" (p. 462).

While Hughson insists that only that which adds content or some new species to the content of what is given by God can be a mediation of revelation, it seems to this author that what Hughson describes as the modality of the divine enlightening which enables the recipient to judge a particular meaning as revelation is not so dissimilar to the modality of symbol stressed and developed by Dulles. In Hughson's reading of Aquinas, there is the "species," and then there is the divinely given (enlightened) interpretation; and it is the meaning arrived at via this enlightened interpretation which is the actualization of revelation. In the symbolic mediation view of revelation argued for by Dulles, there is the symbol, and then there is the interpretation, understanding or meaning which is "evoked" from the recipient via his or her participation in the symbol; and it is in this evocative function that the recipient becomes aware of the symbol's revelatory meaning. It is this coming to awareness of the revelatory meaning brought to consciousness by the evocative power of the symbol (the symbolic mediation) that is the actualization of revelation.

The question that remains for Dulles that is more fully developed in the theology of Aquinas as Hughson presents it, concerns the genesis of the meaning within the recipient that is "evoked" via the recipient's encounter with the revelatory "species" (symbol). For Aquinas, this is an additional revelatory act of God, a movement of the Spirit within the intellect of the recipient, that works in concert with the species to effect or actualize the conscious reception of the revelatory meaning. Dulles does not specifically consider this question, but in the understanding of this author, the revelatory meaning is within the believer as a result of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and the New Covenant written not on tablets of stone, but on the heart of the believer (Heb 10:16-17; cf. Jer 31:33-34). The evocative function and power of the symbol draws this revelatory meaning forth from the depths of the recipient's psyche to full conscious awareness, and in so doing mediates the actualization of revelation.

³⁷² Dulles, "The Symbolic Structure of Revelation," 67-68.

historically conditioned. The same symbol may communicate a profoundly different meaning in different times, places, communities and circumstances. For example, the Cross in pre-Christian Rome evoked terror and elicited compliance with Imperial authority, the same symbol in the Christian era communicates divine self-sacrificing love, evokes repentance and elicits forgiveness of both neighbor and enemy. Symbols *draw meaning* from the historical context in which they arise, and it is this meaning which they then communicate.

I noted above that Christ represents a single, but glaring, exception to the affirmation that revelatory content, received through the mediation of revelatory symbols, is not coterminous with the essence of the divine mystery. With the Incarnation a special case arises. Uniting in himself full divinity and full humanity, Christ is able to accomplish in a once-for-all, full and perfect way, the human receipt and acceptance of the fullness of divine mystery offered in revelation. Thus the Council could say that Christ, in his very person, is divine revelation – the fullness, in fact, of the unveiling of God.³⁷³ Dulles echoes this doctrine in many places, but most notably in an essay considering the possibility of on-going (that is, post-Apostolic) revelation as only existing so long as such revelation does not “add to the content of the definitive revelation given in the Incarnate Son.”³⁷⁴

2. Revelation as Communication

Having thus far established the transactional character of revelation and the necessity of mediation for revelation to occur, it is now possible to undertake a more

³⁷³ *Dei Verbum* 2. It is significant to note, however, that this same sentence in *Dei Verbum* describes Christ as “both the mediator and the fullness of revelation.” Cf. *Dei Verbum* 7.

³⁷⁴ Dulles, “Revelation as the Basis for Scripture and Tradition,” 111.

careful exploration of symbol in the accomplishment of that mediation, and a more precise understanding of Dulles' revelation theology, variously referred to as the "symbolic communication," "symbolic disclosure," "symbolic mediation," or simply "symbolic" approach to revelation. In order to arrive at such a view three aspects must be clarified: first, the understanding of revelation as divine self-*communication*; second, how this communication is specifically and necessarily symbolic in nature; and finally how symbolic communication accomplishes a mediation between the divine reality and the human intellect without becoming *de facto* something external to the concept of revelation itself.

Among the important influences from Latourelle on Dulles' theology of revelation, especially early in his career, was the view of revelation from the vantage point of communication. From Latourelle, Dulles appropriated an approach to revelation which begins by recognizing revelation as fundamentally an act of communication. While this may sound rather obvious, it is in fact an important determination. Revelation seen as fundamentally an act of divine self-expression, for example, rather than an act of communication, is more open to interpretation as an act accomplished by God alone, established as an in-breaking of the divine into the world and left to await human discovery and interpretation. According to such a view, revelation occurs when the word of God is spoken, when God acts in history, or moves within the soul to effect a spiritual awakening. Revelation in this view may be seen as revelation by the mere fact of its existence; and by its existence it demands a response of faith. It does not demand a response in order to become revelation properly so-called.

a. Divine Self-Gift

In contrast, when one begins by understanding revelation as fundamentally an act of communication, the basic assertion is that in the absence of real communication revelation properly speaking has not yet occurred. As Dulles puts it, “it may be argued that revelation does not achieve itself until it is formulated in human words.”³⁷⁵ The teaching of *Dei Verbum* that revelation is most perfectly realized in the person of Jesus Christ points to revelation as something of an exchange of persons, a divine self-gift. But even this understanding is at heart a communication – the communication of persons. It is a phenomenon whereby something of the divine reality is made present in the human intellect, communicated from one reality to the other. The divine person is communicated, however imperfectly, to the human person.

In this view revelation – like all communication – is defined by a transfer of some element of self (usually, but not necessarily, ideas) from one being to another; and the accomplishment of revelation – like all communication – requires that it is both given and received. In order for a self-disclosure of God to ascend to the dignity of a revelation, it must be received as divine self-disclosure, accepted in faith and interpreted by the community which shares that faith.

In his monograph Latourelle had argued for the accomplishment of divine revelation taking on just such a transactional character. For Latourelle, revelation centered around the transference of thought by “the word” – which is to say, around the act of communication. But the communication in its essence encapsulates a demand for a response, and it is this demand which gives revelation a structure, which by its very

³⁷⁵ Dulles, *Revelation Theology: A History*, 20. Emphasis added.

nature, is necessarily transactional. Latourelle explains, “Every word is a call, a demand for reaction. . . . If every word is a demand for reaction, this is because word tends towards communication, even if it does not always produce communication.”³⁷⁶ By insisting upon the communicative nature of revelation, Latourelle, and after him Dulles, also insists upon the fact that in those instances when the word does not produce communication, it also does not produce revelation. For Dulles, the symbol provides the necessary vehicle to accomplish the communication of self between God and humanity in a way that preserves the infinite mystery of God and yet meets the human needs of concreteness, definite meaning, and historicity.

As we have seen, when Dulles speaks explicitly of the content of revelation, it is common for him to define such content in terms of divine essence. In this view, regardless of the model employed or the particular *modus* of revelation – doctrinal propositions, historical events, personal experiences, dialectical presence, new awareness and so on – what remains consistent is the element of divine self-disclosure within revelation. Revelation is not to be understood as a phenomenon whereby God can be conceived of as remote or external to the revelatory content itself. It is not, as H. Vorgrimler puts it, news, information or tidings *about* God; rather, it can only be properly understood as revelation insofar as what is communicated is the very essence of the divine mystery – God’s very self.³⁷⁷

Perhaps for this reason Dulles stresses the insufficiency of any attempted definition of revelation as analogous to an attempt to comprehend the mystery of God:

³⁷⁶ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 316.

³⁷⁷ Herbert Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 8-9.

Every definition is necessarily abstract; it confronts its subject matter with a particular outlook, a particular concern, and a particular conceptual framework. While this is legitimate, it should not cause us to forget that revelation itself, as a concrete and mysterious self-communication of the divine, cannot be circumscribed by any definition. It is apprehended as much through significant facts, intuitions of value, and symbolic imagery as through clear and distinct ideas.³⁷⁸

Yet even in the midst of his claim that no definition is adequate, he considers

“communication,” at least, to be an indispensable element. The very thing that cannot be satisfactorily defined is nonetheless described as “a concrete and mysterious self-communication of the divine.”

In a similar vein, Latourelle emphasizes that communication is no mere aspect or quality of revelation. Rather, “seen in its totality, revelation is a phenomenon of *word* (speaking), obviously including great diversity in forms and means of communication.”³⁷⁹ Regardless of the myriad forms that it may take, it remains in essence a means of communication. There is within the concept of divine revelation an undeniable understanding of gift, transference, movement – that is to say communication – from God who is revealing to the human persons to whom the revelation is given. For Latourelle word, by nature, is not inert; it carries with it the demand of response or reaction. *A fortiori*, the Word of God which constitutes the phenomenon of revelation demands a response of faith from the human hearer. It can be frustrated to a certain extent if the response is not a response of faith, in which case communication does not occur and revelation remains, at least temporarily, unaccomplished. But the essence of revelation is word, and the nature of word is communication.³⁸⁰

³⁷⁸ Dulles, *Revelation Theology: A History*, 11.

³⁷⁹ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 315.

³⁸⁰ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 316-17.

Latourelle notes further that in Scholastic teaching verbal communication itself was presented as essentially revelatory. Speech was seen as a way of one person manifesting his or her thoughts to another. Latourelle goes so far as to describe the Scholastic view of “speaking” in explicitly revelational terms, calling it an “unveiling of thought,” an unveiling that is accomplished 1) through the medium of signs, 2) through the word of communication and 3) through the realized sharing of knowledge.³⁸¹ Latourelle does not restrict the image of revelation as the communication of thoughts to inter-human revelations, however, claiming it applies (with the proper allegorical understanding) to divine revelation as well: “Revelation as communication designates . . . the phenomenon of interior illumination which puts the prophet in possession of divine thinking.”³⁸²

Regardless of the form in which one conceptualizes the revelatory disclosure – divine thought, the Word of God, the essence of divine mystery – it is clear that communication is the mechanism by which revelation is achieved. We turn now to consider more closely the nature of that mechanism.

b. Symbolic Self-Disclosure

For Dulles, clearly, revelation is nothing other than divine self-communication. In fact, God “in his dynamic self-communication,” constitutes the very subject matter of theology.³⁸³ Further, and most importantly for our purposes here, the most fundamental aspect of the nature of that self-communication is its symbolic character. Throughout his writings, Dulles unyieldingly insists that if revelation is to be achieved at all it must

³⁸¹ Ibid., 315-316.

³⁸² Ibid., 315 n.1.

³⁸³ Dulles, “From Symbol to System,” 45.

be achieved through symbolic communication, for the symbol is what mediates revelation. Revelatory knowledge is *essentially* symbolic.³⁸⁴ The communication is nothing – in fact cannot even occur – unless it is symbolic communication, i.e., unless it comes about through the instrumentality of symbol, for “God and the supernatural order cannot be directly described or defined in human concepts and language. Dwelling in inaccessible light, God immeasurably surpasses all that can be thought or said about him.”³⁸⁵ In the absence of symbolic mediation that which is proposed as revelatory content, the essence of the divine mystery, is unintelligible to humanity. It cannot be received, and therefore cannot become revelation.

Dulles approached this assertion as early as 1966, already beginning to formulate a doctrine of the necessity of symbol in order for there to be any real communication of revelation. Regarding the wealth of symbolism to be found in the Scriptures, he writes:

The language of everyday prose would be incapable of mediating the loving approach of the all-holy God with comparable warmth and efficacy. The inexhaustible riches which theologians and men of prayer have been able to find in the Bible would seem to be intimately bound up with its inspired symbolism; for every symbol, by reason of its

³⁸⁴ One does encounter the occasional comment in Dulles’ corpus which seems to argue against, or at least mitigate, such a claim. For example, after considering the rich symbolism in the Scriptural witness, Dulles concludes, “The argument from scripture, to be sure, does not prove that revelation must by its very nature be symbolic. To establish this, one would have to construct a theoretical argument based on the nature of revelation itself, considered in relationship to the human person as recipient. The validity of such an argument would not be admitted by all, for the reasoning would appeal to certain theological and anthropological assumptions which are not self-evident,” (“The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 59). However, the claim here that the argument from Scripture is insufficient proof does not contradict my claim that Dulles himself consistently holds the position that revelation is indeed essentially symbolic and necessarily mediated by symbol. Earlier in the same work, Dulles insists that whether or not revelation *must* be symbolic communication, this is in fact the essence of that revelation as we have known it, “Whatever the consequences for doctrinal truth may be, it is difficult to deny that the occurrence of revelation, as attested by the Bible, is highly symbolic” (58), and goes on to summarize that symbolic knowledge serves as a *uniquely apt* medium of revelation (63). While prescinding in places from a rigorous demonstration of revelation as essentially symbolic, it is clear that this understanding pervades his thought throughout his career.

³⁸⁵ Dulles, “Handing on the Faith Through Witness and Symbol,” 300. He continues: “How, then, can the believer hope to focus his or her attention on God? To answer this question one must refer to symbolic communication.”

concreteness and polyvalence, defies exhaustive translation into the abstract language of doctrinal discourse.³⁸⁶

By 1980 he had become more forceful, claiming that the very structure of revelation is symbolic, and in particular, that “revelatory symbols are those which express and mediate God's self-communication.”³⁸⁷ In 1992, writing on the essential relationship of symbol to theological method, he became quite explicit, writing “God discloses himself, I affirm, by symbolic communication.”³⁸⁸ Hence symbol is constitutive of divine revelation; in the absence of symbol and symbolic disclosure, revelation does not occur.

I have already mentioned in the previous section that in the thought and teaching of St. Thomas, speech was understood to be a matter of communicating or manifesting one person's thoughts to another. Here it may be helpful to revisit that teaching, to emphasize that St. Thomas also taught that this manifestation or communication of thoughts was accomplished specifically through the medium of signs. Considering the case of the manifestation of thoughts by a pure spirit (e.g., angels, God), St. Thomas recognizes two obstacles that could prevent such a manifestation, or self-revelation. The first obstacle is the will, in such cases where one simply does not wish to disclose oneself to another; the second is the absence of a suitable sign: “and so it happens that even when the will directs the concept of the mind to make itself known, it is not at once made known to another; but some sensible sign must be used.”³⁸⁹

³⁸⁶ Dulles, “Symbol, Myth and the Biblical Revelation,” 6.

³⁸⁷ Dulles, “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 55-56.

³⁸⁸ Dulles, “From Symbol to System,” 44.

³⁸⁹ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 315; cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, I, q. 107, a. 1: “unde cum etiam voluntas ordinat conceptum mentis ad manifestandum alteri, non statim cognoscitur ab alio; sed oportet aliquod signum sensibile adhibere.”

This is not to suggest that God's self-communication is restricted to only what may be communicated through such symbols as are already recognized as such by the recipient of revelation. Rather, those elements of created reality which God freely chooses to involve in the process of revelation are, by that very fact, established as revelatory symbols within the context of that revelatory event and the community which receives it. The waters of the Red Sea, the Temple, the Kingdom (and person) of David, and the cross of Christ, to consider but a few, are revelatory symbols because they became the chosen instruments of particular revelations to the People of God. "Strictly speaking," writes Dulles, "there is nothing which could not, under favorable circumstances, become a symbol of the divine."³⁹⁰

But in what sense is it proper to speak of symbol when applying this concept to revelatory communication? Dulles draws his understanding, in significant part at least, from the work of Karl Rahner and his concept of the *Realsymbol*, or as Dulles translates it, "symbolic reality." Dulles summarizes that such a symbol is "a sign whereby something realizes itself as other,"³⁹¹ though Rahner puts it a bit more forcefully. Rahner emphasizes the presentation effected by the symbol: "we call this supreme and primal representation, in which one reality renders another present (primarily 'for itself' and only secondarily for others), a symbol: the representation which allows the other 'to be

³⁹⁰ Dulles, "The Symbolic Structure of Revelation," 56: "The symbols pertinent to divine revelation . . . may be almost infinitely various. They may be cosmic objects or natural occurrences, such as the sun, the moon, the wind, and the waves. Or they may be particular personages or historical events, such as Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt or Jesus Christ crucified and risen. Or again, the symbols may be artifacts such as a temple or an icon. Further, they may be words or writings, such as the figurative language of the prophets and apostles or the sacred writings of a religious tradition. A true story, a myth, a parable – any of these can become a vehicle for the divine self-communication."

³⁹¹ Dulles, "From Symbol to System," 44.

there’.”³⁹² Specifically in the case of God, the *Realsymbol* comes about as the result of the self-expression of God in that which is not God (in the created order). This divine self-expression, revelation *per se*, was most perfectly realized in the Incarnate Son, but was, and continues to be, realized less perfectly in many other symbols as well. For Rahner, and consequently to a large extent for Dulles, God realizes God’s self in self-expression, and the divine self-realization in self-expression is by definition a real, or to use Dulles’ term, ‘presentative’ (vs. *representative*), symbol.³⁹³ Divine self-communication therefore is essentially, and by nature, symbolic.

c. Characteristics of Symbolic Communication

After describing and critiquing five different approaches to revelation in part one of *Models of Revelation*, Dulles begins the second section with a chapter devoted to clarifying and explicating the notions of symbol and symbolic communication operative in his own theology of revelation, and showing by means of application to the five previously presented models how symbols operate to communicate knowledge of divine reality.³⁹⁴ Dulles was certainly not the only, nor the first, author to recognize or emphasize the importance of symbols for theology or for a more adequate means of comprehending reality.³⁹⁵ He developed his symbolic realism in conversation with

³⁹² Karl Rahner, “The Theology of Symbol,” *Theological Investigations* 4 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 225.

³⁹³ See Dulles, “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 68.

³⁹⁴ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, Ch. IX, pp. 131-154.

³⁹⁵ In addition to the authors Dulles specifically references and which most directly influenced his thought on the subject (see note 396, below), Gerald O’Collins, in *Retrieving Fundamental Theology: The Three Styles of Contemporary Theology* (New York; Malwah: Paulist Press, 1993), 167 n. 2, lists the following significant works on the relationship of symbol to culture, belief, and reality: Gustaf Aulén, *The Drama and the Symbols: A Book on Images of God and the Problems They Raise* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970); Edwin R. Bevan, *Symbolism and Belief* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1968); Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970); idem, *Symbol, Myth and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Bernard J.

diverse thinkers such as literary critic Philip Wheelwright, philosophers Michael Polanyi and Paul Ricoeur, to some extent theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich, and followed Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner in applying this symbolic realism as a necessary component to a theology of revelation.³⁹⁶

Dulles defines his notion of symbol, “in agreement with many modern authors,” in terms of its relationship to the concept of sign: “I shall hold that symbol is a special type of sign to be distinguished from a mere indicator (such as the shadow on a sun dial) or a conventional cipher (such as a word or diagram). A symbol is a sign pregnant with a plenitude of meaning which is evoked rather than explicitly stated.”³⁹⁷ This last sentence highlights two very important elements in Dulles’ theory of symbol: the symbol’s ability to convey a multitude, even inexhaustible multitude, of meanings, and the symbol’s dynamism in relation to the beholder. In other words, the symbol is not a static reality

Cooke, *The Distancing of God: The Ambiguity of Symbol in History and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); Frederick W. Dillistone, *The Power of Symbols in Religion and Culture* (New York: Crossroad, 1986); idem, *Traditional Symbols and the Contemporary World* (London: Epworth Press, 1973); Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961); idem, *Symbolism, the Sacred and the Arts* (New York: Crossroad, 1985); Carl Jung, ed., *Man and His Symbols* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964); Wolfgang W. Müller, *Das Symbol in der dogmatischen Theologie: eine symboltheologische Studie anhand der Theorien bei K. Rahner, P. Tillich, P. Ricoeur und J. Lacan* (Frankfurt am Main; New York: P. Lang, 1990); P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976); William A. Van Roo, *Man the Symbolizer* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1981); Alfred North Whitehead, *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1928).

³⁹⁶ Of particular influence one may mention the following: Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), “The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1962), 191-218, and *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976); Philip Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1962); Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (New York: Harper, 1964), Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975); Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1957), “Die Idee der Offenbarung,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* NF 8 (1927), 403-412. Dulles draws from a number of Rahner’s works regarding symbol and its application to revelation and theology in general, including *Hearers of the Word* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969) and *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), but of greatest importance in this regard was Rahner’s essay “The Theology of the Symbol.”

³⁹⁷ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 132. Among these “many modern authors” Dulles makes specific mention of Paul Tillich, H. R. Niebuhr, Karl Rahner, Paul Ricoeur, Langdon Gilkey, Ray Hart, John Macquarrie, Louis Dupré and Gregory Baum. However, he is also quick to note that his own understanding of symbolic communication and commitment to a symbolic realism is not bound to the epistemology or terminology of any other authors.

that is simply acted upon (viewed and comprehended) by the beholder; rather it is also a dynamic reality that acts upon the beholder, effecting change within the beholder on a variety of levels. Perhaps the most characteristic aspect of symbol in Dulles' presentation is its polysemy, based on an ability to evoke knowledge via the power of suggestion: "the polysemic character of symbolic communication . . . always suggests more than it clearly states."³⁹⁸ In doing so, the symbol effects a transformation on the human subject. As a special type of sign that is meaningful and effective, Dulles' notion of symbol, even in its most basic presentation, comes very close to the technical notion of sacrament within Christian theology. The single distinction between symbols in general, revelatory symbols, and sacraments is the reality to which they point, or, put another way, the reality which presents and realizes itself in the symbol. If this reality is a self-communication of God the symbol becomes a revelatory symbol; if it is the divine mystery itself, drawing the beholder into the life of grace in its symbolic realization, it is more properly considered a sacrament.

Having established at least the basic boundaries of the notion of 'symbol' operative in his project, Dulles then identifies four characteristics of symbolic communication, that is to say, characteristics of symbols as they effect the communication of knowledge that are particularly germane to a theology of revelation.³⁹⁹ Dulles in fact presents these four characteristics as especially important because they are the attributes he has identified as shared or common between symbolism and revelation.

³⁹⁸ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 136.

³⁹⁹ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 136-139.

Participatory Knowledge

The first of these characteristics, and perhaps the most foundational, concerns the quality of knowledge communicated by the symbol: it is participatory in nature and not merely speculative.⁴⁰⁰ The special modality of the symbol is realized in its ability to draw one out of oneself and into the realm of the symbol in an active, participatory role. The symbol functions as symbol only in so far as the subject surrenders to it, and enters into the world created by the symbol. A symbol only communicates knowledge “insofar as it lures us to situate ourselves mentally within the universe of meaning and value which it opens up to us.”⁴⁰¹ As an indirect mode of discourse, the symbol can act as a portal between transcendent and immanent realities, but, as portal, imposes nothing. Rather, the symbol invites one to pass through, to enter a new world of meaning and in this participation to appropriate new knowledge.

Furthermore, a particular signifier is not *in itself* necessarily symbolic; rather, it derives its symbolic power from the community which recognizes it as a particularly potent and efficacious sign because of the shared heritage and communion that exists within the community. For example, the bald eagle is a powerful symbol for an American citizen, but for others who do not participate in American culture and society it has no such evocative capacity. Thus the symbol requires participation on two levels if it is to function as symbol and communicate knowledge: participation in the heritage, beliefs, traditions and commitments of the community within which the symbol is defined, and participation in the world of meaning created by the symbol itself by

⁴⁰⁰ I have characterized this property as the most foundational of the four because in one way or another the other three each depend and build upon the participation of the subject in the event of symbolic communication.

⁴⁰¹ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 136.

approaching the symbol in humble submission, surrendering to its power and “inhabiting [its] environment.”⁴⁰²

Personal Transformation

If one enters into the symbol-world, and submits to its power, the symbol arouses emotions, engages the imagination, and alters perceptions; in short, the symbol acts upon the knower and effects a transformation. At a very basic level the symbol, by drawing one out of oneself and into the world of meaning it has created, shifts perspective, and endows the knower with an alternate point of view from which to see and therefore understand. This shifting vantage point has a transforming effect on the knower even before any communication of meaning is accomplished. The perspectival change in itself can be a source of knowledge as one is drawn out of a known, comfortable understanding and into a broader comprehension. One cannot submit to the symbol, enter into and participate in the symbol’s world of meaning as part of the community within which and for which it is constructed, without experiencing a personal transformation.

Influence on Behavior and Commitments

One of these transformations specifically targets the knower’s behavior toward the reality realized in the symbol, arousing emotions that have the effect of strengthening one’s commitment to that reality. One thinks in this regard of the many corporate logos that have been carefully designed and employed to accomplish this very behavioral effect. Through carefully orchestrated advertising, businesses seek to create a strong affective association within prospective consumers between this symbol and their

⁴⁰² Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 136, quoting from Mitchell, “Symbols are Actions, not Objects,” 2.

products or services, so that when the symbol is encountered the viewer's emotions are engaged, commitments are renewed, and "brand loyalty" is strengthened. We identify with such logo-symbols in nearly everything we consume or employ: food, clothing, colleges, cars, healthcare, insurance, electronics, sports franchises, and on and on.

Religious symbols function in a similar manner: when a devout believer earnestly ponders an especially meaningful Christian symbol, suddenly the whole complex of narrative, beliefs, emotions, attachment, and resolve are rekindled, strengthened, and brought to the surface. The believer recalls the story of the life and teachings of Christ and the power of the love that led him to accept the agonizing ignominy of the cross; the beholder is shamed by the ugliness of sin and humbled by the bottomless well of divine mercy and forgiveness; the believer may resolve anew to follow more closely the teachings and example of Christ, and experience a reinvigorated commitment to Christian life and mission. The symbol, if it is approached with humble submission by one who participates in the community which has given it shape and definition, has this transformative effect, this transformative power.

New Realms of Awareness

Finally, Dulles emphasizes that "symbol introduces us into realms of awareness not normally accessible to discursive thought."⁴⁰³ Drawing insights from a variety of authors on the symbol's epistemological significance and potency, Dulles argues that there are aspects or elements of our reality as human persons that exceed the reach of other methods of human inquiry and discovery.⁴⁰⁴ Specifically, symbols provide

⁴⁰³ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 137.

⁴⁰⁴ Among the works which appear to have been most influential in the development of Dulles' symbolic realism include, in addition to those listed in note 396, above: Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*

knowledge of those deeper aspects of reality that cannot be described or even discovered by the generally accepted methods of the scientific community. Here it appears Dulles most clearly relies on Paul Tillich, who develops in some detail an argument for a multi-tiered character of reality.⁴⁰⁵ While discursive thought can access one such level, there are many other levels to our reality that require the efficacy of symbols in order to become discernible by the human faculties of observation and intellect. For Tillich this relationship between the symbol and reality's deeper levels can be demonstrated especially well by a consideration of the arts, for "all arts create symbols for a level of reality which cannot be reached in any other way. A picture and a poem reveal elements of reality which cannot be approached scientifically. In the creative work of art we encounter reality in a dimension which is closed for us without such works."⁴⁰⁶ In fact, continues Tillich, the symbol

not only opens up dimensions and elements of reality which otherwise would remain unapproachable but also unlocks dimensions and elements of our soul which correspond to the dimensions and elements of reality. A great play gives us not only a new vision of the human scene, but it opens up hidden depths of our own being. Thus we are able to receive what the play reveals to us in reality. There are within us dimensions of which we cannot become aware except through symbols, as melodies and rhythms in music.⁴⁰⁷

(Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) and *Knowing and Being* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1969); Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958) and "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism," in Mircea Eliade and J. M. Kitagawa, eds., *The History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

⁴⁰⁵ See Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 48 *et passim*.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁰⁷ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 48. Tillich also campaigns for the essential role of the community in the formation and function of the symbol as symbol, particularly for the sustenance of the symbol's special efficacy. "Symbols cannot be produced intentionally," he argues. "They grow out of the individual or collective unconscious and cannot function without being accepted by the unconscious dimension of our being. Symbols which have an especially social function, as political and religious symbols, are created or at least accepted by the collective unconscious of the group in which they appear."

All of this fits well within Dulles' conception of the symbol as exercising an evocative power over the beholder, drawing out of the beholder a knowledge and understanding that is both new in its move to explicit consciousness and pre-existing in its previously tacit character. The symbol draws us into a world in which connections are made in such a way that what was once perhaps latent or discreet pieces of data are now brought into consciousness as meaningful and coherent.

D. Symbolic Communication in Dulles' Revelation Theology

As mentioned briefly in the introduction, Dulles, by his own account, argued in *Models of Revelation* "for a restoration of revelation as a primary theological category."⁴⁰⁸ The concept of revelation certainly functioned this way within his own theological system, and the concept of symbol was, without doubt, the "primary category" for his revelation theology.

Dulles' journey to this conviction began with communication. As the previous section demonstrated, Dulles held revelation to be, at its root, an event of communication: it is the communication of the Word of God, certainly, but even more broadly than this, it is the communication of the very life and mystery of God. Formed as he was in scholastic theology, Dulles was well aware of and accepted the Thomistic axiom that knowledge can only be received according to the mode of the knower; and furthermore understood that what is given in the event of revelation – the event of divine self-disclosure – is infinitely beyond the grasp of the human person's mode of knowing. Given these assumptions, Dulles came inevitably to hold, first of all, the conviction that

⁴⁰⁸ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, ix.

revelation cannot be received by human persons immediately; revelation must, necessarily be, and therefore is, always, mediated.

All of this led inexorably to ‘symbol’ as a mediatory reality capable of expressing divine, transcendent reality in a mode accessible to finite beings, without divesting that reality of its transcendence or divinity. Symbol was for Dulles the only reality capable of accomplishing such a task. Symbol, indeed, is “uniquely apt,” in Dulles’ estimation, precisely because of the unique modality of its communicative powers. In this work I have termed this unique modality of the symbol – especially the revelatory symbol - its “mediatory potency.” It is the heart of Dulles’ revelation theology, and the source of that theology’s particular significance. In the following chapter, the mediatory potency of the revelatory symbol will be brought into relationship with the sacramental efficacy of the ecclesial symbol. However, to ensure the fruitfulness of that conversation it is important to first consider systematically the importance and significance of symbol, and especially its mediatory potency, for Dulles’ revelation theology.

1. The Mediatory Potency of Symbolic Communication

Given therefore, that at least for Dulles, the mediatory mechanism of revelation is specifically and necessarily symbolic communication, it is necessary now to consider more precisely how the symbolic nature of God’s self-communication accomplishes the necessary mediation between the divine mystery and human consciousness, and what is unique about the nature of symbol that renders it specially, and even exclusively, capable of effecting such a mediation. Dulles addresses this question most directly in response to the claim, sometimes put forward by proponents of a more propositional theory of revelation, that because the symbolic communication approach is *merely* symbolic, it has

the potential to imperil the truth claims of revelation.⁴⁰⁹ The very aspect of symbolic language that Dulles seizes upon as most useful and in fact necessary for the mediatory communication of revelatory knowledge – its potential for multivalence – it is argued, can prevent revelation from imparting definite truth. Unless the symbol is interpreted with literal statements, so the reasoning goes, it cannot convey definite meaning.⁴¹⁰

Dulles recognizes the validity of this line of reasoning, but rejects it as resting upon an under-appreciation for “the cognitive dimension of symbolic communication.”⁴¹¹ He argues for the power of symbol to mediate the divine self-communication without sacrificing meaning on the basis that symbol, by virtue of its concreteness and polyvalence, is defined not by any lack of meaning, but quite the opposite: by an inexhaustible depth of meaning. It is the intended recipient of the divine self-disclosure (the human intellect, either individual or communal) and not the mediatory agent of the revelation (the symbol or symbols) that is the limiting factor *vis-à-vis* the communication of meaning. Yet for some readers it is this very “overplus of meaning” that gives them pause: for if symbolic communication has such an overabundance of meaning, how is one to discern any *definite* meaning? If there are no boundaries or limits to the symbol’s meaning, it can hardly be useful for communicating divine truth, or for distinguishing what is revealed from what is imagined or projected by the human psyche. In other

⁴⁰⁹ Dulles recognizes and responds to this objection, for example, in “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 58-66, and again in *Models of Revelation*, 141ff.

⁴¹⁰ This critique is especially apparent in Carl Henry’s article-length review, “The Priority of Divine Revelation,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27, no. 1 (Mar, 1984) 77-92. Dulles seems to have anticipated and pre-emptively responded to this critique by “propositionalists” of a symbolic-communication approach to revelation, as Henry’s argument that “the symbolic portrayal of revelation thus imperils the truth of revelation” and “Symbols by contrast [with propositions] carry no clear meaning and impart no definite truth” strongly echoes the critique Dulles had already taken account of in *Models of Revelation* 141-41, and even earlier in “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 58-60. Cf. Henry, *op. cit.*, 91; Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 141-2.

⁴¹¹ Dulles, “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 66.

words, a construct such as symbol, if it can mean anything ends up meaning nothing. This, however, is not the concept operative in Dulles' work. For Dulles the symbol's meaning is, first of all, inexhaustible, not infinite. It has an inexhaustible *depth* of meaning, but not an infinite *breadth* of meaning. The symbol cannot mean just anything; rather the definite meaning of the symbol can be plumbed again and again to gain additional, more profound insight.

Key to this ability of the symbol to evoke an inexhaustible depth of meaning is its reliance on participation for the communication of knowledge. By virtue of participation in the community within which the symbol functions as symbol, and in the world of meaning created by the symbol, a participation which the symbol not only requires but also elicits or evokes, "symbol can convey a richer and more personal apprehension of reality in its deeper dimensions than non-symbolic language can do."⁴¹² From this basis, Dulles can summarize powerfully that the symbol's "distinctive mark is not the absence of meaning but the surplus of meaning."⁴¹³

Without entering into and subjecting oneself to the world created by the symbol, one cannot receive the knowledge contained in it, cannot encounter in the symbol that which is symbolized in the same real and profound manner. The communication of the divine mystery which is offered in revelation is only fully accessible from within the world of the symbol; only to those who willingly subject themselves to the power of the symbol and participate in the community for which the created reality functions

⁴¹² In support of this point Dulles insists that there are aspects of the human experience, and of our reality that cannot be adequately expressed or communicated by literal discourse alone. Among these aspects are included both the awesome and the horrific, beautiful and barbaric. All those elements of our existence that defy quantification, measurement or that simply transcend the reach of direct description, if they are to be communicated, require "a language with power of suggestion," i.e., a symbolic language. Cf. "The Symbolic Structure of Revelation," 66.

⁴¹³ Dulles, "The Symbolic Structure of Revelation," 66.

symbolically.⁴¹⁴ The liturgy offers a particularly profound example of the importance of participation for the full apprehension of the revelatory knowledge contained in the symbol-system of the community of faith. As Susan Wood notes, attendance or observation of the liturgy is not sufficient; rather, “our participation in the liturgy gives us access to a certain kind of knowledge of God.”⁴¹⁵ The reception of this knowledge requires an active participation in the liturgy, and a willingness to submit to and enter into the symbol-world which it creates. Entering into and participating in the liturgy in faith shared and shaped by the community to which the symbols are given and within which the symbols are interpreted and appropriated creates the possibility for knowledge – revelatory knowledge – otherwise inaccessible: “in the liturgy we do not acquire knowledge *about* God; we acquire knowledge *of* God.”⁴¹⁶ This is an important distinction, for knowledge of God is self-gift, self-offering, self-disclosure. A knowledge *of* God requires a communication of the divine essence, however incomplete or partial the reception of this essence may be. Revelation is accomplished through the mediation of the intricate system of symbols functioning within the community of faith coming together in liturgical celebration.

The very existence of symbols in our human experience suggests that the language of literal discourse is insufficient to express and communicate certain elements of that experience. There are many elements of everyday human experience which seem to defy description without recourse to symbolic language, hence the richly symbolic genres of literature (epic, myth, poetry, etc.), music, and art have been a part of human

⁴¹⁴ Dulles, “From Symbol to System,” 44.

⁴¹⁵ Susan K. Wood, SCL, “Participatory Knowledge of God in the Liturgy,” in *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church*, ed. James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001): 95-118 at 95.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

communication from its earliest forms. Dulles notes that, if this is true of the communication of thoughts and experience from one human person to another, how much more must it be true of communication of divine mystery from the transcendent to the human intellect. “God,” says Dulles, “is utterly beyond description.”⁴¹⁷ And yet, this same God wishes to be known, personally, by his creation.

Symbols can present a solution because of their unique ability to access the imagination, elicit participation, construct new worlds of meaning, and evoke understanding or awareness far beyond the capacity of literal discourse. The nature of the divine mystery, as Rahner and others have pointed out, is a matter of overwhelming, rather than insufficient, knowledge.⁴¹⁸ In the event of divine revelation as it is here described, that which is offered as communication to created beings can only be the fullness of the divine mystery, God’s very self, for God, as absolutely simple, cannot be disclosed piecemeal.

The nature of symbol and the nature of the divine have this in common: both exceed the capacity of human intellect (God *in actus*, the symbol *in potentia*). They are both inexhaustible, and in this sense exceed a finite intellect. While the meaning that is communicated via the symbol is not, technically speaking, infinite, it is inexhaustible. While symbol cannot communicate the divine essence *in toto*, “Symbolic language can mediate . . . something of God’s reality,”⁴¹⁹ and this “something” is never fully exhausted. Symbolic language is language imbued with the power of suggestion; language that evokes, elicits, calls forth from the psyche and the imagination truths and

⁴¹⁷ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 142.

⁴¹⁸ See Rahner, “The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology,” *Theological Investigations IV* (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1966), 36-73; See also Gabriel Marcel, *Reflection and Mystery*, trans. G. S. Fraser, vol. 1, *The Mystery of Being* (London: Harvill Press, 1950). 210 ff.

⁴¹⁹ Dulles, “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 65-66.

knowledge that are otherwise inaccessible to the conscious mind. And it can do so as often as one returns to the symbol, enters its world, submits to its power, participates in its reality, and opens oneself up to receive its communication.

It is important, however, to avoid conceiving of the symbol as something external to the essence of revelation itself, as if that which God wishes to communicate – the divine essence – is given first to a mediatory agent, and then from that agent to the eventual recipient. Rahner, again, clarifies the error of such a conception. The intimate and essential relationship between the symbol and the reality symbolized is such that the symbol, as expression of the symbolized, could not exist apart from what it symbolizes, and the reality symbolized is not fully realized apart from its symbol. It is not, in Rahner's terminology, realized without expressing itself through its *Realsymbol*. Thus,

the symbol is the reality, constituted by the thing symbolized as an inner moment of itself, which reveals and proclaims the thing symbolized, and is itself full of the thing symbolized, being its concrete form of existence.⁴²⁰

For this reason we can say that the symbolic communication mediates revelation because it is a self-expression, a self-realization or bringing to reality of that which is being communicated. The symbolic communication is both the mediatory agent and also the accomplishment of the revelatory event.

It is of course significant, to assert, as Dulles does, just the fact that revelation is realized through the mediation of symbolic communication. But for Dulles it is not enough to say only that it is *possible* for symbolic communication to mediate revelation, or even that this mediatory modality so happens to be an accurate representation of reality – as if the symbol is but one among other potential agents of divine disclosure. Rather,

⁴²⁰ Rahner, "Theology of the Symbol," 251.

Dulles presses further in asserting that symbols, and the modality of symbolic communication, are *uniquely* suitable vehicles for divine revelation.⁴²¹

Rahner's theology of the symbol supports Dulles' contention that divine self-communication is always and necessarily symbolic.⁴²² In fact Rahner pushes the issue even further than Dulles, claiming not only the necessity of symbol for divine self-communication, but also the necessity of symbol for the very realization of being: the manifestation of being not only to an other (communication), but to the self as establishing an existence of the self within reality. Since, therefore, self-expression is necessary to the realization of being, and such expression is by definition symbolic, both self-realization and self-expression of any sort are necessarily and essentially symbolic.⁴²³ This is consistent with Rahner's understanding of God as being itself. Though Rahner consistently emphasizes that God, as "being itself" is qualitatively different from created beings, however exalted, his ontology of symbol still applies, perhaps even more so because of the perfection of being in God. According to Rahner,

The Father is himself by the very fact that he opposes to himself the image which is of the same essence as himself, as the person who is other than himself; and so he possesses himself. But this means that the Logos is the 'symbol' of the Father, in the very sense which we have given the word: the inward symbol which remains distinct from what is symbolized, which is constituted by what is symbolized, where what is symbolized expresses itself and possesses itself.⁴²⁴

⁴²¹ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 138.

⁴²² Rahner, "Theology of the Symbol," 224, 229, 236, 249-50, *et passim*. Rahner's theology of symbol – in fact Rahner's theology in general – was a very strong influence on Dulles thought early, and throughout, his career. Carey notes in *Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J.*, 122, how Dulles "devoured" "Rahner's articles in *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* and the first volume of his *Schriften zur Theologie* (1960) before he finished his theological education."

⁴²³ Rahner, "Theology of the Symbol," 224. Rahner asserts, that "the basic principle of an ontology of symbolism [is that] all beings [including God] are by their nature symbolic, because they necessarily 'express' themselves in order to attain their own nature."

⁴²⁴ Rahner, "Theology of the Symbol," 236.

Regardless of the qualitative difference between individual beings and the essence of God as the ground of being, for God, also, the process of self-realization results in self-expression. And when that self-expression is manifested in the other, there is a *Realsymbol* (the divine *Logos*). The divine self-communication is necessarily symbolic, for the very expression of the divine mystery results in the manifestation of the *Realsymbol* of God: the representation in created reality that allows God to be present and manifest to that reality. In a helpful elaboration, Herbert Vorgrimler clarifies the implications of Rahner's theology of symbol:

A being realizes itself by expressing itself. To put it another way: a symbol is effective because it brings a being to reality. That is what is meant by "real symbol": a genuine symbol does what it symbolizes.

Thus,

If God desires to be present to human beings, God's presence must create a symbolic expression for itself in order that it can be "real" for human beings, since the complete disparity between God and the human makes an unmediated presence and communication of God impossible.⁴²⁵

It is therefore in negotiating the communication of the divine mystery to human consciousness that the symbol becomes properly speaking a 'revelatory symbol.' The symbol allows God "to be there" with creation, making possible the manifestation of God in humanly intelligible form. Thus Dulles can argue that every "outward manifestation," every expression of God's self that can be received by that which is other than God, is, by virtue of its character as communication, a divine self-disclosure or revelation, and that in every such manifestation "the communication is *symbolic* and *evocative*."⁴²⁶ He applies this rubric to such wide-ranging elements of the life of faith as the work of creation, the

⁴²⁵ Herbert Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 10. The essay of Rahner's to which Vorgrimler refers is "The Theology of the Symbol."

⁴²⁶ Dulles, "From Symbol to System," 45. Emphasis added.

Incarnation, grace itself, the church, the sacraments, and the Scriptures (the Word of God), insisting that “for religious knowledge the logic of signs or symbols is all-important.”⁴²⁷

2. Critiques and Challenges of Symbolic Communication

The foregoing description is in essence what Dulles has identified as his “symbolic realist” philosophy – a view which emphasizes that reality is so thoroughly imbued with symbols that in fact (as Tillich argued) it is only accessible in any sort of full or adequate sense because of the human capacity to engage with symbols. Of course, Dulles’ symbolic approach to revelation, and indeed his appropriation of symbolic communication in general, have not gone unchallenged.⁴²⁸

As mentioned briefly above, one commonly encountered objection is the assertion that to subject the communication of meaning to the agency of symbol imperils the meaning itself.⁴²⁹ The very quality which Dulles has insisted gives the symbol its special aptitude to mediate the most transcendent realities (its polyvalence) is also, it is claimed,

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 44.

⁴²⁸ Some of these challenges have taken the form of an objection to revelation itself. Dulles is aware of at least two strong voices behind this critique – one philosophical (Karl Jaspers) and the other theological (F. Gerald Downing) – taking note of their position at both ends of the book (chapter 1, and again in Chapter 11). Dulles’ treatment in the book, however, does not seem to have satisfied Downing, who presses the issue further in his review, “Models of Revelation,” *Theology* 87, no. 718 (July, 1984): 295-97. Indeed the review has more the character of an apologetic against the use of the term ‘revelation’ within Christianity than a review of Dulles’ book.

Downing claims that in *Models of Revelation*, Dulles “has conceded most, if not all of my [Downing’s] substantial points. It is a puzzle to discern why he then still insists on the term ‘revelation.’” In his critique Downing claims, legitimately enough, that what we have from God is lacking in clarity. He finds this lack to be of such nature that what God has given cannot properly be called a “revelation,” preferring to reserve that term for what others might describe as “full” or “perfect” revelation – the eschatological beatific vision in which all will ultimately be made known. Dulles recognizes Downing’s objections, but does not share his conviction that revelation, in order to be worthy of the term, must have this full and perfect level of clarity. See Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 11-13 and 277-78.

⁴²⁹ See “The mediatory potency of symbolic mediation” starting on page 158, above. Cf. Carl F. Henry, “The Priority of Divine Revelation: A Review Article,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27, no. 1 (Mar, 1984): 77-92.

the reason a reliance on symbol for the communication of knowledge is insufficiently precise to be the vehicle of divine revelation.⁴³⁰ But to say that symbols grant human persons access to knowledge beyond the observable, phenomenal, measurable, or deducible is not, Dulles insists, to say that such knowledge is without definite meaning. Dulles captures and maintains both the inexhaustible and the definite characteristics of symbolic meaning in his rather erudite summary: “By putting us in touch with deeper aspects of reality symbolism can generate an indefinite series of particular insights.”⁴³¹ The meaning of the symbol cannot be exhausted, because one can return to it again and again – indefinitely – each time coming away with deeper, more intimate insights into the nature and reality of that which is symbolized. Such insights are not, however, of such an abstract or encompassing nature that the meaning or insights become stripped of the definite or particular. The symbol is, in Dulles’ usage, an infinite well of knowledge; but that knowledge is knowledge of a particular reality with which the beholder is in a phenomenological relationship.

⁴³⁰ Cf. Dulles, *The Symbolic Structure of Revelation*, 65-67, where Dulles addresses critics of his symbolic approach who have identified its lack of definite meaning as a potential weakness. Dulles notes this criticism is most common among proponents of what he calls the propositional model of revelation, including “positivistic reductionists ... following in the traces of Auguste Comte,” “empirically-minded instrumentalists such as Richard Braithwaite,” and in particular Gordon Clark who published his reservations in “Special Divine Revelation as Relational,” in C. F. H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), 39-40.

Such thinkers emphasize the necessity of literal (rather than symbolic) statements in order for there to be any coherent meaning at all. In other words, if there are no clearly defined limits to the symbol’s meaning, it ends up meaning nothing. Dulles responds with a clarification, first, that symbolic knowledge is characterized not by a dearth of meaning, but rather by an over-surplus of meaning. More meaning than can be absorbed by the human intellect does not equate to an absence of definite meaning. Secondly, symbolic language and communication is necessary to convey a wide range of cognitive content that literal statements simply cannot express: not only the infinite reality of the divine mystery, but also elements of human experience so emotionally charged or numinal as to elude the grasp of ordinary discursive language. By way of example Dulles mentions the birth of a child, the serenity of a sunset, or the horror of an invasion. In each case, the reality cannot be adequately conveyed without recourse to language which has “the power of suggestion,” that is, the power to suggest more than it states; to draw meaning out of the hearer’s own experience and in this way evoke meaning beyond the literal.

⁴³¹ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 137.

Other thinkers, whom Dulles characterizes as proponents of his “historical” model of revelation, are put off by what they perceive as the susceptibility of the symbolic-mediation approach to take on a problematic ahistorical character.⁴³² Dulles readily concedes that such a critique is warranted in certain instances: “Some proponents of the symbolic approach, concerned primarily with the literary analysis of the symbols, attach little importance to the facts of salvation history. They speak as though Christian faith had as its object not the God who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth but rather the biblical image of Jesus as the Christ.”⁴³³ However Dulles is quick to distance his own symbolic-mediation approach from such a view, insisting rather that symbols, for all their transcendent qualities, are nonetheless historically bound and situated.⁴³⁴ Because symbols draw meaning from the historical context in which they arise, a given symbol has the capacity to communicate particular meanings to particular communities and the individual members of those communities, in particular times and places. For the same reason, within Dulles’ symbolic-realism approach, it is not possible for a symbol to function both as symbol and ahistorically.

To illustrate this point, let us consider the meaning communicated by the highly symbolic reality of water, within two specific historical contexts: the waters of the sea through which the Israelites passed during their exodus from Egypt, and the waters of baptism. In the first instance, though it is a single event, there are two communities involved and therefore two quite distinct contexts and profoundly different meanings

⁴³² Among the prominent proponents of the historical model of revelation, Dulles includes Anglican Archbishop William Temple, Presbyterian scholar G. Ernest Wright, Biblical scholar Oscar Cullmann, Catholic theologian Jean Daniélou, Ernst Troeltsch and, perhaps most notably, Wolfhart Pannenberg. Cf. Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 54-60.

⁴³³ Dulles, “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 67.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

communicated by the symbol. For the Israelites, the waters of the exodus are a symbol of liberation, of Yahweh's power and benevolence, of the birth of a new nation in covenant relationship to God. For the Egyptians, however, the symbolism is much different: chaos, death, destruction, loss, powerlessness, disgrace.

In the second instance – the waters of baptism – the meaning communicated by the symbol of water has some elements in common with the waters of the Exodus, but also some important distinctions and additions. Like the exodus, baptism symbolizes liberation by the power of God, though not from human slavery; rather, from sin and death. The baptismal waters symbolize new birth, as did the waters of the exodus, but not only the covenantal formation of a new nation; rather an ontological change in the individual described as a death to the old, sinful person and a re-birth in Christ so profound that what emerges is in a very real sense “a new creation.”⁴³⁵ Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, Christians draw from the symbol of baptismal waters the additional meaning of washing, or cleansing from sin.

Holding firmly to the historical conditioning of symbols and their resultant symbolic communication is an important element in Dulles' appropriation of symbol for the communication of divine revelation. Doing so serves to emphasize that the symbolic-communication approach is consistent with the event-character of revelation upon which he insists. Revelation, for Dulles, achieves itself in events (transactions involving a divine offer and human reception), and events occurring in particular times and places.⁴³⁶

⁴³⁵ Cf. 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15.

⁴³⁶ Dulles emphasizes the event, or transactional, character of revelation often in his writings. See, for example, “The Theology of Revelation,” 51; “Revelation in Recent Catholic Theology,” 362-65; and *Models of Revelation*, 219-20, 257-58. Consistent with the view that revelation, and particularly revelation as mediated by symbol, has a transactional or event character, are Dulles' teachings on the event character

The symbols through which revelation is mediated in the process of its achievement must therefore also exhibit this historical awareness and conditioning. One must only be cautious, as Barth strongly asserted, to guard against such an historical awareness disregarding the mediation of symbol and degrading revelation to a matter of positivistic history: “as something discerned by a spiritually attuned consciousness, revelation never truly exists outside of faith.”⁴³⁷

Though on this point Dulles finds in Barth, especially the later Barth, some common ground, more generally he sees in Barth’s thought a particularly forceful critique of the symbolic-communication approach to revelation.⁴³⁸ Barth’s revelation theology is most representative of what Dulles has called the “dialectical” approach to revelation. This approach is susceptible of a fundamental opposition to the use of symbols in the communication of revelation, fearing in particular that if revelation were to be accomplished via the mediation of any element of creation – object, historical event, person, image, or any other symbol – this would either jeopardize the particularity of Christ as an agent of revelation (no indication here of seeing Christ Himself as the symbol *par excellence* of the divine mystery), or blur the boundaries between the transcendent God and created reality, or both.

However Dulles is quick to assert that it is a distortion of the symbolic-communication approach as he defines it, and not the approach Dulles himself is advocating, which reduces Christ to a symbol of revelation that is “no longer uniquely

of both sacrament and of the Church. See *Models of the Church*, 69; “Community of Disciples as a model of the Church,” *Philosophy and Theology* 1, no. 2 (Winter, 1986), 99-120 at 110.

⁴³⁷ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 151.

⁴³⁸ Dulles is here referring primarily to Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, volumes I and II.

normative,” but rather merely one symbol of revelation among many others.⁴³⁹ In contrast, the symbolic communication model Dulles is laboring to produce is, he contends, similar in structure to the “word of God” as that concept is conceived and used among dialectical theologians.⁴⁴⁰ Dulles’ understands this word of God to function very much like symbol as we have been describing it:

As the self-expression of the revealing God who addresses his creature by means of it, the word works mysteriously on human consciousness so as to suggest more than it can describe or define. It points beyond itself to the mystery which it makes present. The twisted imagery of the seer, the fiery denunciation of the prophet, and the joyful tidings of the apostle are alike imbued with a mysterious power to produce, as symbols do, the new life of which they speak. As the inspired words enter a stable tradition and become rooted, so to speak, in the collective consciousness of a believing people, they become still more palpably symbolic.⁴⁴¹

In this description one can discern several qualities Dulles has presented as qualities of the symbol: polyvalence, the power to evoke knowledge, the character of pointer and of creating or facilitating a presence of its object, and the defining importance of the communal tradition within which it functions.

It seems reasonable therefore to ask whether in this response to the dialectic school’s critique, Dulles has in fact argued against his own conviction that the symbol is not only an apt vehicle of revelation, but a *uniquely* apt vehicle, or whether that the concept or category of “the word of God” upon which Barth and the dialectic school build their foundation is, in the final analysis, a symbol according to Dulles’ understanding of that term – albeit a uniquely normative symbol. If the latter, the further question arises as to whether this gives cause to differentiate among symbols such that one should no longer claim that “symbol” in general is a uniquely apt vehicle of

⁴³⁹ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 151.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

revelation, but rather that only Christ, as both revelation *par excellence* and as the perfect symbol of the Father, attains to this “uniquely apt” status while other revelatory symbols should be considered relatively less apt than Christ but still within the only category (symbol) that is able to accomplish the feat of revelation. In this case it would seem to follow that all revelatory symbols, in expressing the divine mystery, participate to a greater or lesser degree in the symbolism of Christ as the full and perfect symbolic expression of that mystery. Indeed, Dulles concludes that “the word, as the sign which articulates meaning, is a necessary complement to revelation through any other kind of symbol”⁴⁴² and spends the following chapter describing how Christ may be that “single central symbol that unsurpassably mediates the true meaning of existence and of human life.”⁴⁴³

Models of Revelation, and Dulles’ symbolic-communication approach it argued for, were generally well received by the theological academy; indeed many of the published reviews offered high praise.⁴⁴⁴ However there were also a number of scholars who found the approach unsatisfying or even problematic.

William Thompson, while not strenuously opposing Dulles’ symbolic model or rejecting his construction of it, did not accept Dulles’ contention that symbols are uniquely apt vehicles for the communication of revelation. According to Thompson, Dulles “could just as well have built upon the historical and new consciousness models to

⁴⁴² Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 152.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, 154. Cf. Chapter X, “Christ the Summit of Revelation”, pp. 155-173.

⁴⁴⁴ Among the more favorable reviewers one might include Gerald O’Collins, who published reviews in *Gregorianum* 65 (1984): 181 and in *Heythrop Journal* 27, no. 2 (April 1986): 181-83; as well as enthusiastic reviews by Pol Vonck, “Models of Revelation,” *African Ecclesial Review* 28, no. 5 (October, 1986): 354, and Joseph Varacalli, “Models of Revelation,” *Religious Education* 79, no. 2 (Spring, 1984): 313-314. Even those who were critical of one or another element of Dulles’ symbolic communication approach, with few exceptions found in the text much to recommend. The number of reviews alone – nearly twenty just in English – suggests the significant impact the work had within the academy.

accomplish the same thing.”⁴⁴⁵ Thompson’s claim may be based on a somewhat reductive understanding of the function of symbol within Dulles’ system, however, for he goes on to elaborate that “History and human awareness, after all, can be viewed as complex wholes, embracing deeds, human symbolism, and the impulse of divine grace.”⁴⁴⁶ In turning to symbol as an agent or vehicle of divine communication Dulles is not seeking merely a concept capable of expressing a complex whole, or even capable of embracing “the impulse of divine grace,” however important that may be. Symbol is uniquely apt for Dulles’ purposes because of its capacity to express a *transcendent* reality – the divine mystery – within phenomenal reality without reducing or constricting that transcendent mystery in any way. Because the symbol allows transcendent reality to express itself thusly, it can safeguard that transcendence and allow the finite mind to contemplate and appropriate the transcendent reality’s self-communication more and more deeply without end or limit. Furthermore, for Dulles, symbol is uniquely apt as this vehicle because by definition symbol is what is created when a transcendent reality expresses itself in that which is other. Such self-expression does not realize itself in human history unless and until that history is interpreted and understood from within the symbol system of the community to which the expression is directed. Likewise, for human awareness, while such awareness may be able to encompass the deeds, symbols and divine impulses that comprise the divine-human relationship, it is not by this fact therefore necessarily able to create the conditions by which these elements (historical deeds, symbols, divine impulses) are made known as self-expressions of the divine mystery.

⁴⁴⁵ William E. Thompson, “Models of Revelation,” *Theological Studies* 45, no. 2 (June, 1984): 357-59 at 358.

⁴⁴⁶ Thompson, “Models of Revelation,” 358.

Echoing the concerns of the dialectic school of thought and at pains to preserve the integrity of the word of God, Evangelical theologian Donald Bloesch objected in particular to the emphasis Dulles placed on the role of the church (a reality comprising, at least in part, the created order) in the symbolic communication of revelation. He explains, “My problem with Dulles’s model is that it makes the knowledge of revelation seem to rest on the ability of the church to discern the clues and intimations of divine presence in its own tradition rather than from a free, new act of the Word of God.”⁴⁴⁷ It is difficult however to understand how even such a “free, new act of the Word of God” could effectively communicate revelatory knowledge without the interpretative context provided by the community of faith. Outside such a community, and the faith it embraces, any such act of the word of God is likely to be misunderstood, missed altogether, or intentionally ignored. Indeed Dulles argues that the word and the symbol must work together to effect the communication of divine mystery. The symbol must be interpreted by language, and the word must be recognized as symbol. It needs the symbolic interpretation and appropriation provided by the community of believers who receive it as revelatory. “The symbol becomes revelation only when interpreted, and interpretation never occurs without a linguistic component,” writes Dulles. He continues however, that, “Such attesting words are necessarily symbolic, for otherwise they could not be conducive to a salvific union with the divine. Revealed religion ... creatively enriches and renews the speech that it adopts; it coins metaphors and thus gives rise to new symbolism.”⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁷ Donald G. Bloesch, “Models of Revelation,” *Christian Century* 100, no. 34 (Nov 16, 1983), 1057-58.

⁴⁴⁸ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 152.

Among the most forceful critiques of Dulles' use of symbol in his revelation theology was published by James Moore in *The Journal of Religion*.⁴⁴⁹ Moore found *Models of Revelation* as a whole "leaves the reader unsatisfied," because the models are too "rigid and self-contained" and the "constructive proposal [the symbolic-communication approach] seems all too thin and unimaginative."⁴⁵⁰ Moore's greatest objection is that Dulles' use of symbolism is neither effective as a heuristic tool to overcome the "problematics of each model-type" and resolve the various models' inadequacies, nor sufficiently developed as a constructive position to be viable as a new model or "a wholly new approach to the matter" as "a fully developed alternative." In calling for a fully developed constructive approach, Moore has in mind a theology of symbol that takes account of up-to-date contributions to narrative theory, cultural anthropology and history of religion, as well as ways in which symbols can be (and have been) twisted or abused so as to distort, rather than advance, communication.⁴⁵¹ Moore finds a critical assessment of symbol to be missing in Dulles' treatment, and as a result Dulles forces the reader to be content "to rest somewhere between a heuristic notion and a constructive position."

Moore is certainly on solid ground in insisting that, if Dulles is going to appropriate the concept of "symbol" as a central component in his revelation theology, he must be aware of and account for any actual or potential problems associated with it. Where Moore's judgment may be a bit hasty is in his claim that such an awareness "is missing in a volume otherwise not lacking in critique." Moore's critique hearkens back

⁴⁴⁹ James F. Moore, "Models of Revelation," *Journal of Religion* 65, no. 3 (July, 1985): 423-25.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 423-24.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 424. Moore suggests "the distorted use of symbols ... has been recognized especially by those giving theological reflection to the Holocaust," though does not provide an example.

to the concerns already mentioned that the symbol's polyvalent nature gives rise not only to an inexhaustible depth of meaning but also to unacceptable vagaries of meaning.⁴⁵² If Moore is concerned that a symbol can be distorted, and thereby distort the communication of knowledge given by the symbol in such a way that the knowledge received by the individual or community contemplating the symbol is a distortion of the truth and not the truth of revelation itself, this suggests more a problem with the creation or use of the symbol by the community – a flaw in the functioning of the community and its appropriation of the symbol – than a problem with the symbol itself or the symbol's ability to communicate revelation.

The creation of the symbol, its appropriation by the community of faith as a symbol (revelatory or not), and its use to communicate knowledge (revelation in the case of a revelatory symbol) are in Dulles' system governed and guarded by the Spirit of the one God of whom the symbol is the self-expression, a spirit that is living, present and active within the community of faith. For it is not to just any community that a symbol communicates revelatory truth; rather, only within a community of faith which reveres and receives divine communication as revelation, in faith, do symbols become the vehicle of divine revelation. The logic of Moore's argument could, it would seem, be applied equally well to propositional or historical models of revelation, for neither the great events of salvation history nor even the Sacred Scriptures themselves accomplish a

⁴⁵² Cf. Cyril S. Rodd's review, "Models of Revelation," in *Expository Times* 95, no. 2 (Nov 1983): 33-34. Rodd was favorably impressed with Dulles' project as a whole, but in a similar vein worried that "the key idea of 'symbol' needs to be given greater precision to save it from the dangers of vagueness."

revelatory communication of the divine mystery without an interpretation arrived at in faith, under the special protection of the Spirit, by and within the body of Christ.⁴⁵³

3. Application of Symbolic Communication to Revelation

In these and other similar criticisms or concerns, whether originating as responses from other thinkers within their own developed theology of revelation, from Dulles' presentation of the critiques he engages with in *Models of Revelation* itself, or from published reviews of Dulles' work, it is often difficult to distinguish the criticisms of Dulles' symbolic realist philosophy in general from criticisms of that symbolic realism as it functions within his theology of revelation (forming the foundation of what he refers to as the "symbolic-communication approach" to revelation).

As noted earlier, Dulles did not intend to present his symbolic realism approach to revelation as one more model in addition to the other five he created and critiqued.⁴⁵⁴ He did not intend it as either a "super-model" to incorporate all of the other models within itself, nor as a preferable alternative to the other models that grants a clearer vision of revelation with fewer flaws. Rather, in describing the concept, characteristics, and applications of symbols and their power to effect communication, Dulles intended to introduce a tool for re-envisioning and strengthening the existing models. Dulles is careful in fact to avoid the use of "symbolic-communication model" or similar language, preferring instead to speak of a symbolic-realist or symbolic communication approach to revelation. The insight Dulles seems to want to share with theologians of revelation in

⁴⁵³ Cf. Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 144: "Doctrine enriches the meaning of the symbols . . . As the process of doctrinal development goes on, the Church tests new proposals through its grasp of the total symbol-system (including the symbolism of creed and liturgy), through its long experience of the Christian life, through scholarly debate, and through the ongoing assistance of the Holy Spirit."

⁴⁵⁴ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, viii.

general is the insight that all communication that occurs in the act of divine revelation has a component of symbolic mediation to it, but this assertion does not necessarily constitute a threat to or wholesale rejection of existing views on the nature of revelation.

Dulles himself refers to his symbolic-realist approach as “a dialectic tool to retrieve what is sound and sift out what is partial or one-sided, in each of the models.”⁴⁵⁵ Others have styled it “a heuristic tool for highlighting the most significant of questions and suggesting possible means for resolution.”⁴⁵⁶ Dulles insists that the use of symbol, and the application of the characteristics of symbolic-communication, are not restricted to his own approach, nor even “specific to any one model.” In fact, he contends that “all five models . . . can accord a certain role for symbolic communication in revelation, but the concept and function of symbol varies according to the model.”⁴⁵⁷

While Dulles is very intentional about not favoring one model over another in so far as a symbolic-communication awareness can be beneficial, he is nonetheless careful to note that only a symbolic realism, and not a symbolism with subjectivist leanings, can be fruitfully employed as an aid to overcome difficulties in the various models without introducing new or greater difficulties of its own. In his autobiographical book, *A Testimonial to Grace*, Dulles gives some clear insight into the importance in his own mind of a realist approach to symbolism if it is to be of use in a theology of revelation. He describes the symbolic-realism for which he argued in *Models of Revelation* as being

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁶ Moore, “Models of Revelation,” 424.

⁴⁵⁷ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, viii.

specifically opposed to the type of subjectivist symbolism George Lindbeck attributed to what he called the “experiential-expressivist” school of thought.⁴⁵⁸

This school’s approach, in Dulles’ mind, is susceptible to precisely those difficulties many of Dulles’ critics – particularly those who would align themselves with the “propositional” or “historical” models – levied against him. If symbol were seen in a subjectivist light the power of the symbol to communicate definite meaning would be lost; the connection of the symbol to the reality expressing itself through the symbol, and the doctrines, history and traditions of the community within which the symbol is created and functions symbolically, would not be able to provide the boundaries of the symbol’s meaning. Unless the symbol arises organically in this way from the expression of the reality symbolized, and therefore has an ontological connection to that reality, it devolves into a signifier, arbitrarily assigned by the beholder. Its meaning cannot be shared from one individual to another, because there is no communal reality to which it is irreversibly connected.

Thus Dulles continues that because his own approach is fundamentally realist – emphasizing the ontological connection between the reality symbolized and the symbol through which it expresses itself – he is able to avoid (or at least answer to) such critiques. He contends that in arguing for a symbolic realism, he was “able to affirm the predominantly symbolic character of revelation without minimizing the historical and doctrinal aspects that were so prominent in Catholic teaching.”⁴⁵⁹

In the final chapter of *Models of Revelation*, Dulles describes in some detail the characteristics of his proposal for applying a symbolic-mediation awareness to his own

⁴⁵⁸ Dulles, *A Testimonial to Grace*, 126.

⁴⁵⁹ Dulles, *A Testimonial to Grace*, 126.

and other theologies of revelation.⁴⁶⁰ First, as noted briefly above, symbolic mediation is a dialectical tool. Its purpose in this regard is to help identify elements in any theology of revelation that are sound, or deficient, so that they may be either embraced, corrected, or rejected. Dulles devotes a chapter of his work to this very task, “to correct the specific weaknesses of each model while seeking to preserve their valid insights.”⁴⁶¹

While rather harshly critical of the propositional approach to revelation at times, Dulles nonetheless finds there can be a symbiotic relationship between this model and the symbolic-communication approach. Symbols give rise to the thought that is eventually expressed in propositional form, and doctrinal propositions can in turn help to interpret symbols, both enriching their meaning and providing boundaries of acceptable meaning.⁴⁶² In this way the symbols can help prevent the propositions from placing undue limits on the divine communication, and the propositional doctrines can help ensure that there is a definite, if inexhaustible, meaning communicated by the symbol.

Likewise, Dulles insists on “the profound affinity between the symbolic and historical approaches to revelation.”⁴⁶³ Historical events and even historical memories held and formed by the faith of the community can, not unlike the doctrinal propositions, enrich and add specificity to the symbols of the Christian life and faith. But also, and again in a way similar to the propositional approach, historical events can express a much greater range of meaning when these events, recognized as Christian symbols, “by their

⁴⁶⁰ The following discussion is a summary of material found in *Models of Revelation*, pp. 265-271.

⁴⁶¹ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 266.

⁴⁶² Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 143-4.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 145.

symbolic power grasp and mold the consciousness of the religiously oriented interpreter.⁴⁶⁴

The mystical experience model would seem to be most at odds with a symbolic approach, as it is by nature focused on an unmediated encounter with the divine. However, the overlay of a symbolic communication character of revelation to the mystical experience model can point out that even in ecstatic encounters there are signs or symbols of the presence of God that the individual experiences. Without the framework of the faith community's symbol-system it would be much more difficult to interpret and discern the message given in such revelatory experiences. Dulles, with reference to Karl Rahner, explains that there can be an immediate experience of sorts – the experience of grace is in certain instances an unmediated presence – however, this unmediated, “inner presence of God cannot achieve itself except insofar as it becomes mediated, or mediates itself, in created symbols.”⁴⁶⁵ Here again the symbolic-communication approach serves as an interpretive aid, bringing meaning and form to an otherwise inexpressible outreach of divine grace, enabling its achievement and in so doing rendering it revelatory.

While dialectical theologians are deeply suspicious of invoking any element of the created order, including symbol, to play a role in the accomplishment of revelation, Dulles sees in these two a strong affinity. The word itself is, for Dulles, highly symbolic, while at the same time the word “as the sign which articulates meaning” is necessary to complete the accomplishment of revelation via symbol, for “symbol becomes revelation

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 146.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 149. Reference to Rahner's “mediated immediacy” is drawn from Rahner's *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, 81-87.

only when interpreted, and interpretation never occurs without a linguistic component.”⁴⁶⁶

Finally, the symbolic approach is already to a large degree embedded in the concept of the new awareness approach to revelation, but the symbolic approach as Dulles has developed it still has something to add. In a somewhat ironic twist and certainly contrary to some critiques of a symbol-centered theology of revelation in general, the symbol can function within the new awareness model to concretize its meaning, and provide the revelation given through the experience of new awareness a grounding in reality. Religious symbols, Dulles says, “claim to be based on the permanent structures of reality,” and as such, impose upon the subject a demand to find its meaning in relation to that reality.⁴⁶⁷

A second characteristic of Dulles’ symbolic mediation proposal as applied to a theology of revelation is embedded in the definition of revelation. Dulles defines revelation in this context in terms of a self-manifestation of God – but this manifestation is only accomplished, as has been previously discussed, when there is a subject to perceive it, that is to say, when it has been communicated in some way. For Dulles, this communication has a specific form, and that form is symbolic. Dulles is quick to qualify that this description of revelation is not meant to suggest that revelation and symbol are the same; therefore somewhat uncharacteristically Dulles qualifies the last element of his description saying the form of the communication is symbolic, “at least in a broad sense.”⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁶ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 152.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴⁶⁸ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 266.

A third characteristic of his proposal as it is applied to a theology of revelation is the identification and application of five important elements of symbolic realism. Each of these elements are necessary for an adequate understanding of Dulles' particular theory of symbolism, which has been carefully constructed to avoid the errors and shortcomings evident in some other theories of symbolic communication. First among these elements is the specificity and concreteness of revelatory symbols. Revelatory symbols are not constructs of the imagination, but elements of created reality that God has appropriated for use as mediatory symbols for the divine self-expression. Dulles continues that such symbols – persons, events, and other realities – are revelatory acts through which God has brought the Christian Church into existence.⁴⁶⁹

Secondly, though at several points Dulles has been clear that in order to take on the full character and authority of revelation, symbols must be interpreted within the Christian community of faith and its broader symbol-system, this interpretation is not merely a human endeavor, nor are the symbols used humanly chosen. Revelatory symbols are those which, as a result of the acts of divine self-manifestation or disclosure have been “taken up into the biblical and Christian tradition and thereby given added depth and significance.”⁴⁷⁰ A symbol is created by a community, and functions as symbol within that community to communicate meaning specific to it. In order for a symbol found as part of what Dulles terms the universal symbolism of nature – water for example – to become a revelatory symbol, it must be created by the community of faith in response to a revelatory act of God in which it is called upon to play a part: creation, the flood, the exodus through the Red Sea, and of course baptism.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

Thirdly, a revelatory symbol does not always have to point to a reality entirely other than itself. While it is true that unless the symbol and the reality expressing itself through the symbol maintain a discernible distinction the symbol ceases to be symbolic, there are occasions among revelatory symbols when this distinction is not absolute. Such is the case with Christianity's most profound revelatory symbol, the humanity of Christ symbolically revealing the divine mystery, and in a similar way with the created elements of the church symbolically revealing the Body of Christ.

Fourthly, revelatory symbols go beyond the effects of other symbols which work to arouse emotions, strengthen commitments and strivings and energize ideals. Revelatory symbols, because they are the self-expression of transcendent reality, communicate meaning commensurate with this reality. They provide insight that is otherwise beyond the reach of human faculties. The meaning communicated by revelatory symbols is inaccessible to reason and to direct human experience or observation. And yet, such symbols are not operating outside the bounds of human reality, for "such symbols denote and disclose what is ontologically real."⁴⁷¹

Finally, Dulles emphasizes the capacity of the revelatory symbol to communicate truth by drawing on Wilbur Urban to make a distinction between the two types of truth given through such symbols.⁴⁷² In effecting the transformation of consciousness within the subject, revelatory symbols are expressing a "symbolic truth." This is not to be understood in a reductive sense as "merely symbolic" truth, but rather, drawing from the fourth element just discussed, a truth that is made present through a modality not available to other forms of mediation. Revelatory symbols also have what Dulles calls "the truth of

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 267.

⁴⁷² In making this distinction, Dulles is following Wilbur M. Urban, *Language and Reality* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1939), p. 444.

the symbol,” which emphasizes the concrete rootedness of the symbol. As Dulles explains, “symbols give rise to true affirmations of what is antecedently real.”⁴⁷³ Because there is an ontological relationship between the symbol and the reality symbolized, there is also a strict limit to the meaning the symbol can communicate. Symbols are capable of producing an inexhaustible depth of meaning, yes, but are not “infinitely malleable.” When a symbol is correctly understood as interpreted by the community within which it functions, certain statements are necessarily excluded from a claim to be grounded in the symbol.

Concluding Remarks

In his *Models of Revelation*, Dulles formulates ten conclusions which, taken together, form a useful summary of his signature approach to revelation as symbolic communication. He presents these conclusions as two sets, five negative and five positive, but I find it more instructive to consider the negative and positive aspects of each conclusion together. The first of these are concerned with the value and limits of propositional statements as an instrument of revelation. Dulles affirms that revelation does have a certain “cognitive value”; it is not, in other words, pure experience, event, or affect. Furthermore, the cognitive content of revelation can be formulated in the propositional forms of human language, at least to some extent. Revelation has a permanent quality to it, such that revelatory truths are eternal truths and cannot, once authenticated, become false in other historical contexts. However, Dulles also cautions that revelation must be “transposed” into a propositional form, for it occurs initially in symbolic form. While it can be expressed propositionally, and such expression is valid, it

⁴⁷³ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 267.

cannot be considered adequate to the mystery it seeks to communicate in the same way that a symbol can. Propositional statements work together with symbols to provide context and interpretation, and enable the symbols to “yield their meaning.”⁴⁷⁴

Secondly, symbols are historically conditioned, meaning that the symbol is not self-explanatory, nor is it timeless. It is only when the symbol is read through the Scriptures and within the community of faith – that is, subject to divinely inspired interpreters – that the meaning given by the symbol is to be considered authentically revelatory. There is a definite (both specific and not infinite) meaning in the symbols of Biblical revelation as well as the symbolic events of salvation history, but this meaning is not naturally discernible. When submitted to “prophetically endowed interpreters” the meaning intended by God as a self-manifestation becomes clear and assured. Thus revelatory events, if they are to be disclosive of God, must be experienced anamnetically within the community, for their meaning is discerned not by formal inference (as gleaned through historical criticism), but by “a synthesis of subsidiarily known clues.”⁴⁷⁵

Thirdly, the mediation of symbols – specifically Christian, revelatory symbols, are necessary in order for mystical experiences to convey revelatory meaning. Revelation cannot be simply an “ineffable mystical encounter between God and the individual soul,” contends Dulles, but rather must be interpreted in a theistic or Christian sense if they are to be revelatory. This is not to discount the possibility, reality or authenticity of a mystical experience of the divine; only to say that such experiences require the interpretive mediation of symbol in order to achieve the authority of revelation. Furthermore, symbols, as has been said, evoke participation by the subject,

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 267-69.

⁴⁷⁵ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 268.

and thereby “mediate a lived, personal communion with God.” Symbols facilitate the conditions for an immediate, mystical encounter with God and give it revelatory meaning.⁴⁷⁶

A fourth conclusion to be drawn is that revelation can be neither unintelligible nor so absurd a message that if accepted, must be accepted in a “blind leap of faith.” This follows necessarily from the recognition of revelation as essentially communication; if it is unintelligible there can be no transfer of thought and hence no revelation as we understand that term. The word of revelation is both event and content, but if that word is unintelligible or absurd it becomes stripped of any meaningful content. The event of the word given in revelation, mediated by symbol, has a capacity for meaning far in excess of any propositional language, for as an event of divine self-expression such words are alive and dynamic. If the content of a revelatory symbol is an unintelligible word the symbol is no longer functioning within the community to mediate meaning and therefore has ceased to function as symbol.

Finally, Dulles finds in his symbolic realism approach support for the conclusion that the truth communicated by revelation must necessarily go beyond speculative truth. Among the symbol’s most characteristic features is its power to evoke participation, and to give participatory knowledge. In order to do so however, the symbol demands an obedient response from its subject: “the full significance of revelation can be perceived only by those who respond, with personal commitment within a community of faith.”⁴⁷⁷ Such commitment is warranted by the permanence of the symbolically mediated message of revelation. While symbols are historically conditioned, and therefore so also is the

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 268-69.

⁴⁷⁷ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 269.

message they communicate, there are limits to the effect an historical context can have on the meaning of the revelation. There can be developments commensurate with the changing cultural context, but there cannot be a reversal, nor a change which negates, contradicts, or renders unintelligible an earlier revelation.

Having now completed a systematic presentation and close examination of Dulles' symbolic-mediation or symbolic-communication approach to revelation, the last of the pieces are in place for the constructive work of the dissertation to begin. With the breadth and richness of the concepts of church, sacrament, symbol, and revelation as they operate in Dulles' system now firmly in mind, and armed with a clear understanding of how, why, and to what effect those concepts have combined within Dulles' thought to form his ecclesiological and revelatory convictions, attention can at last be directed to the task of looking at the symbolic mediation of revelation through the lens of a sacramental ecclesiology. The juxtaposition of these two theologumena, and the identification and analysis of the ecclesiology that emerges from their interaction is the subject of chapter four, to which we now turn.

CHAPTER IV:
REVELATION ECCLESIOLOGY: MEDIATORY POTENCY OF THE ECCLESIAL
SACRAMENT FOR THE SYMBOLIC SELF-COMMUNICATION OF GOD

A. The Mutually Constitutive Natures of Sacrament and Revelation

The previous two chapters have concerned themselves with a description and analysis of Dulles' sacramental ecclesiology and his symbolic-mediation approach to revelation theology, based on a symbolic-realist philosophy. The current chapter presents a juxtaposition of those two theological convictions and a formal enquiry into the possibility of the sacrament, or revelatory symbol, that is the church to express itself as the very type of symbolic mediation that Dulles has claimed effects the accomplishment of divine revelation. This enquiry will proceed in three stages: First, an examination of the way in which the realities of sacrament and divine revelation are mutually interdependent and constitutive, which is to say, the sacramental nature of revelation and the revelatory nature of sacrament; second, a demonstration of how and why a sacramental view of the church functions within Dulles' theology as the necessary foundation for understanding the phenomenon of divine revelation as an event of symbolic mediation; and finally an examination of the revelatory modality of the "fundamental sacrament," as the church has been called, in distinction to the seven liturgical sacraments and the "primordial sacrament," Jesus Christ.⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁸ See, for example, Herbert Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, 30-39, where Vorgrimler distinguishes between "Jesus Christ as the Primordial Sacrament" and "Church as Fundamental Sacrament." Vorgrimler offers a helpful clarification on p. 36: "The designation 'primordial sacrament' was applied to the Church by Otto Semmelroth and Karl Rahner after the war. To avoid the terminological confusion occasioned by simultaneously calling Jesus Christ the 'primordial sacrament,' and in order to highlight the enduring, qualitative difference between Jesus Christ and the Church, Semmelroth later referred to the Church as 'root sacrament,' while Rahner called it the 'fundamental sacrament.'" Cf. Semmelroth, *Die Kirche als Ursakrament*; Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, 166-72, 185-86, 373 et al.; and Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments*, Quaestiones Disputatae 9, trans. W. J. O'Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963) where the notion of the Church as the foundational

1. The Revelatory Nature of Sacrament

“Revelatory symbols,” explains Dulles, “are those which express and mediate God's self-communication.”⁴⁷⁹ Thus while all symbols are polyvalent, evocative, and demanding of participatory engagement, certainly not all symbols are, according to this definition, revelatory. Indeed, one need not look far to discover a secular symbol which, while powerful, has nothing to do with the revelation of divine mystery – a national flag, for instance. But what if one limits the consideration to what Dulles refers to as “religious symbols,” that is, to symbols which exist and function as symbols specifically for and within a community of faith? Dulles further asserts that a symbol, at least as it functions within the context of a sacrament, “is not an arbitrarily constructed sign, but one that comes into being because of the spiritual reality that is contained in it.”⁴⁸⁰ The community of faith does not create its religious symbols, but rather recognizes certain elements of created reality as expressions of a deeper spiritual truth or expressions of the faith-life of the community, and therefore accepts them as symbols of the life of faith, relating to them as such. This understanding begs the question, however, whether there is not some important distinction to be made in the revelatory efficacy – or even potential efficacy – among religious symbols, for it would certainly seem that not all such symbols

sacrament from which the seven liturgical rites draw their own unique sacramentality is the overarching thesis

⁴⁷⁹ Dulles, “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 56.

⁴⁸⁰ Dulles, *A Church to Believe In: Discipleship and the Dynamics of Freedom* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 49. While Dulles is speaking in this context specifically of the symbol as *sacramentum tantum*, the assertion applies equally well to non-sacramental religious symbols such as the holy-water font at the entrance to many churches as a symbol of baptismal regeneration and entrance into the life of grace, or candles as symbols of the light of Christ brought by the Church into the world. In each case the symbol arises organically as an expression of the faith of the community. Though gradually adopted by the community of faith, it is certainly not an arbitrary creation or designation of that community. The distinction between such non-sacramental religious symbols and true sacramental signs will be discussed in more detail as this chapter progresses.

are equally adept or equally effective at communicating the mystery of God. Not every religious symbol has its genesis in a revelatory initiative of God.⁴⁸¹

Still, Dulles makes no attempt to place limits or restrictions on the extraordinary variety of elements within the human experience that can become symbols – even revelatory symbols. Not only the highly charged symbolic language of the Scriptural text, the powerful witness to the faith of patriarchs, saints and martyrs, and the mighty events of salvation history have the capacity to perform this function. On the contrary,

The symbols pertinent to divine revelation . . . may be almost infinitely various. They may be cosmic objects or natural occurrences, such as the sun, the moon, the wind, and the waves. Or they may be particular personages or historical events, such as Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt or Jesus Christ crucified and risen. Or again, the symbols may be artifacts such as a temple or an icon. Further, they may be words or writings, such as the figurative language of the prophets and apostles or the sacred writings of a religious tradition. A true story, a myth, a parable – any of these can become a vehicle for the divine self-communication. Strictly speaking, there is nothing which could not, under favorable circumstances, become a symbol of the divine.⁴⁸²

What then are the “favorable circumstances” which transform an otherwise ordinary element of human experience into a revelatory symbol for the community of faith? In reply one may distinguish between what may be called *secular* symbols, *religious* symbols, and *revelatory* symbols. This tripartite distinction may be seen as a function of two variables: the reality expressed in the symbol, and the modality of that expression.

The example used above of a secular symbol, the national flag, surely expresses in a potent way the reality of the nation and the community of citizens that stands behind

⁴⁸¹ Some such symbols, for example, function as expressions of religious faith, or as tools or instruments for deepening the faith of an individual or community, but are not necessarily sources of revelatory truth; rather, as derivative, aids to the life of faith, or reminders of Christian life and history. The ancient “ichthus” symbol that has come into our own time as the ubiquitous “Jesus fish,” for example, points to Christianity but does not necessarily express revelatory truth or constitute an event of divine self-disclosure.

⁴⁸² Dulles, “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 56.

it. It evokes not only meaning, knowledge, tradition, and memories in the mind of the citizen, but in many instances also evokes strong emotions to embolden commitment and reinvigorate participation in the community. It does not, however, express a transcendent, spiritual, or divine reality. The reality pointed to and expressed by the flag of the United States, for example, is an earthly nation, a human community and government, a thoroughly immanent and temporal reality. While it may be “transcendent” in the sense that it transcends the individual and brings to conscious awareness a larger reality, it is not transcendent in the sense of transcending human nature and making present a reality that is both spiritual and noumenal.

Religious symbols on the contrary – and within this category are included the more specifically revelatory symbols – do express a transcendent, noumenal reality, even if that reality is not always, strictly speaking, the self-communication of God. Any number of religious symbols can be an expression of the religious life or of the faith of the individual or community without being an expression of God’s communication of self, per se. Light, water, individual persons (e.g., saint, martyr or bishop), heavenly bodies, a church building or cathedral, an ecumenical council, and so on, can and do, given the right circumstances, function as symbols to evoke from the religiously minded beholder a knowledge, understanding or awareness previously unrealized, marshal the individual and the community of faith to deeper commitment and participation, and create a space in which the meaning of that reality can be received in an intimate and transformative way. Yet not every religious symbol is, according to Dulles’ definition, a *revelatory* symbol.

Whereas the distinction between a secular symbol and a religious symbol has primarily to do with the reality expressed in and through the symbol, the further distinction between religious symbols in general and those religious symbols which can properly be considered revelatory, has to do both with a further refinement of the reality expressed, and with the modality of that expression. Recall Dulles' clarification that a revelatory symbol relates to the self-communication of God in two ways: it is an expression of that divine self-communication as the reality present in the symbol, and the modality of that expression constitutes an effect or accomplishment of the mediation of the divine self-communication to human consciousness.⁴⁸³ For a symbol to be properly considered "revelatory" therefore, it must contain within itself the self-communication God desires to bestow, and have the power by virtue of its symbolic function within the community to mediate that self-communication to the human consciousness of the community and its members. A revelatory symbol cannot merely express a spiritual reality in a general sense, as for example a revered martyr functioning symbolically to express the spiritual reality of indomitable faith and the courage it inspires; in order to be revelatory the symbol must be an expression of God's self, as it is given in communication.

Furthermore, a symbol is not properly speaking revelatory unless it contains within itself an element of both offer and acceptance of the divine self-communication. That is to say, a religious symbol achieves revelatory status when and to the extent that the divine self-communication it expresses is received and accepted as such by the beholder. In certain cases – those cases which are most evidently revelatory, both the

⁴⁸³ Dulles, "The Symbolic Structure of Revelation," 55-56; cf. Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 131.

expression and the acceptance of the divine self-communication are accomplished within the symbol itself. Such cases occur most precisely when the divine reality which comes to expression in the symbol and the human reality participating in the symbol are ontologically united, as is the case in the person of Christ who is both communicating God and accepting Man; in the case of the Sacred Scriptures which “have God as their author” and yet were composed by men who “made use of their own faculties . . . as true authors”⁴⁸⁴ to first receive and then enscribe the Word of God; and, as we turn now to consider, it is the case within the particular modality of a sacrament, which exists “between the minister and the recipient.”⁴⁸⁵

a. The Seven Liturgical Signs

Dulles himself did not publish a developed sacramental theology, contenting himself to consider the nature of sacrament as it functions within the context of ecclesiology, ecumenical dialogue, or fundamental theology (especially a theology of revelation), and as it contributes to a fuller understanding of those realities.⁴⁸⁶ Within those broader contexts, however, he often had cause to clarify the notion of sacrament that was operative for the discussion at hand. In such cases Dulles’ usual method was to

⁴⁸⁴ *Dei Verbum* 11.

⁴⁸⁵ Johann Auer and Joseph Ratzinger, S.J., *A General Doctrine of the Sacraments and the Mystery of the Eucharist*, Dogmatic Theology 6, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 13. For Auer and Ratzinger’s fuller presentation of this notion in their discussion of the Word of God as sacrament, cf. *ibid.*, 142-148.

⁴⁸⁶ There are a few publications which focused principally on the Eucharist, such as: “Consensus on the Eucharist?” *Commonweal* 96 (1972): 447-450; *The Priest and the Eucharist* (Weston, MA: Blessed John XXIII National Seminary, 2000); “The Eucharist as Sacrifice,” in *Rediscovering the Eucharist: Ecumenical Conversations* (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003), 175-187; “The Eucharist and the Mystery of the Trinity,” *ibid.*, 226-239; and “Christ’s Presence in the Eucharist,” *Origins* 34 (March 17, 2005): 627-631. These publications, however, do not have as their principle aim a developed sacramental theology; rather, they attempt to understand the Eucharist and the specific context within which it is considered (sacrifice, priesthood, ecumenism) more fully via closer examination of its relationship to other spiritual, especially ecclesial, elements.

begin with an understanding, drawn from the Tradition, of sacrament as that term applies to the seven individual liturgical rites, then move toward an application of that understanding to the larger reality of, for example, the church, divine revelation, or certain ecumenical dialogues. Following that lead, I will begin by looking at the range of Dulles' teaching on the nature of 'sacrament' as that term pertains to the seven liturgical rites, in order to consider the way in which their sacramental efficacy reflects, albeit in their own distinctive fashion, that of the revelatory symbol.

Writing on the recently published sacramental ecclesiology of Vatican II in *The Dimensions of the Church*, Dulles sought to clarify that the notion of sacrament fulfilled by the church is analogous to one common, liturgical, understanding of sacrament as "a sign of the grace which it brings about."⁴⁸⁷ In this Dulles emphasized the importance of the sign, or symbol, element of the sacramental event, and in so doing draws attention to the fact that one fundamental characteristic of divine revelation, its symbolic efficacy, is likewise exhibited by the individual sacramental rite. Dulles defines sacrament in this context as "a sign of grace," rather than "a symbol of grace," but as has been suggested earlier in this work the meaning of these terms in Dulles' parlance is somewhat fluid depending on the context, and there can be no doubt that for Dulles the sacramental sign is not only a symbol properly so-called, with all of its characteristics, modality and power, but in fact an especially potent symbol by virtue of its divine referent. This is clear from the teaching, quoted above, that a sacrament both signifies and "brings about" divine grace. Later in the same work, and still considering the impact of Vatican II's teaching, Dulles elaborates further that, "From general sacramental theology we know

⁴⁸⁷ Dulles, *The Dimensions of the Church*, 27.

that a sacrament is an efficacious sign of grace permanently instituted by Christ.”⁴⁸⁸ The introduction here of the precision “efficacious sign,” rather than simply “sign,” is a further indication that the concept operative in Dulles’ thought at this point is that of symbol, far surpassing a simple indicator. It hearkens back to the language of the manuals, drawing upon Aquinas in particular, who emphasized that the visible, tangible, phenomenal element of the sacrament (the *sacramentum*) is imbued with a far greater, invisible reality (the *res*), pointed to and made present by this visible element. The *sacramentum*, by virtue of its symbolic character, is the vehicle by which divine grace is made accessible in the reception of the sacrament.⁴⁸⁹

In addition to being a sign of grace and the instrument by which that grace is made effective in the soul of the believer, Dulles also notes that a sacrament is “permanently instituted by Christ.” The sacraments, he emphasizes, are “evidently instituted by Christ to be an enduring means of salvation.”⁴⁹⁰ These comments appear in the context of Dulles emphasizing the salvific character of the sacrament of the church, thus Dulles himself is not at this point concerned to draw out the implications of the necessity of a sacrament’s Christological foundation and institution. There are however, certain important characteristics of sacrament to be drawn from the assertion. In the first place, the necessity of institution by Christ in order for a symbol to be properly considered sacramental, ensures that the reality expressing itself in the sacramental symbol is the Incarnate Word of God. Furthermore, as Rahner has put it, this Word, “the

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid, 51.

⁴⁸⁹ See the *Summa Theologia* III, 60, a.1, for one example of Thomas Aquinas’ distinction between the *sacramentum tantum* (sacrament only – the material sign of the sacrament); the *res tantum* (the reality only – the reality signified but not the sign); and the *res et sacramentum* (the reality and sacrament – the sacramental sign and the reality expressed through it).

⁴⁹⁰ Dulles, *The Dimensions of the Church*, 51.

Logos, as Son of the Father, is truly, in his humanity as such, the revelatory symbol in which the Father enunciates himself, in this Son, to the world – revelatory, because the symbol renders present what is revealed.”⁴⁹¹ In the context of describing the symbolic nature of revelation, Dulles draws on Rahner’s essay, “The Theology of Symbol” and his concept of the *Realsymbol*, to define the humanity of the Incarnate Word as a “presentative symbol,” that is, “one in which the God who is symbolized is present [in Word-event] and operative [as efficacious grace].”⁴⁹² Because what is being expressed and made present in the symbol is the Incarnate Word, a Word which is, as Vatican II stresses, “both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation,”⁴⁹³ the Christological institution of the sacrament underwrites an important element of the sacrament’s revelatory character.

In several places within his consideration of the sacramentality of the church in *Models of the Church*, Dulles appropriates a Tridentine canon in defining sacrament as a reality which both contains the grace it signifies and confers the grace it contains.⁴⁹⁴ By appealing to this teaching, Dulles strives to emphasize the efficacious character of the sacramental sign, a sign by which “the signified reality achieves an existential depth.”⁴⁹⁵ Commenting on Rahner’s theology of symbol, Dulles concludes that “In Christ . . . the

⁴⁹¹ Karl Rahner, S. J., “The Theology of the Symbol,” 239.

⁴⁹² Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 68.

⁴⁹³ *Dei Verbum* 2.

⁴⁹⁴ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 66, 68, 70. This phrase comes originally from the Council of Trent, Session VII (3 March 1547), Canons on the sacraments in general, canon 6. Cf. Norman P. Tanner, S.J., ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, English ed., 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), vol. II, 684 : “If anyone says that the sacraments of the New Law do not contain the grace which they signify, or that they do not confer that grace on those who place no obstacles in its way . . . let him be anathema.”

⁴⁹⁵ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 66.

manifestation and that which is manifested ontologically coincide.”⁴⁹⁶ When therefore, according to Rahner, a symbol – in this case a sacramental sign – “renders present what is revealed,”⁴⁹⁷ it is properly speaking revelatory; yet this is in effect what is claimed by the tradition in defining sacrament as an “efficacious symbol.” Dulles concurs, claiming that it is in the conferral of grace itself that the sign, bringing to existential expression that which is signified, becomes grace-filled.⁴⁹⁸ In this the sacrament again manifests its revelatory character in exhibiting a transactional nature. It is “a sign of grace realizing itself. Sacrament has an event character; it is dynamic.”⁴⁹⁹ The sacraments cannot confer the grace they contain unless there is a participant willing, and properly disposed, to receive it. Trent stipulates as much in the canon just referenced, emphasizing that the sacrament confers the grace it contains “on those who place no obstacles in its way.” The proper disposition of the recipient is necessary to receive the grace of the sacrament, in a way analogous to that in which a properly disposed – that is, willing and receptive – ‘hearer’ is necessary in order to receive the self-communication of God offered in the event of revelation.

The sacrament’s nature as a social and communal reality comprises a further element of the sacrament’s revelatory character. This understanding figures prominently in Dulles’ presentation of the tradition’s theology of sacrament as preparation for his more focused discussion of the sacramentality of the church in both *Models of the Church*

⁴⁹⁶ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 158; cf. “Observations on the Concept of Revelation,” in Rahner and Ratzinger, *Revelation and Tradition*, Questiones Disputate 17, trans. O’Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 15.

⁴⁹⁷ Rahner, “Theology of the Symbol,” 239.

⁴⁹⁸ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 70.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

and again in *Models of Revelation*. “Sacraments are never merely individual transactions,” he claims, for

Nobody baptizes, absolves, or anoints himself, and it is anomalous for the Eucharist to be celebrated in solitude. . . . Sacraments therefore have a dialogic structure. They take place in a mutual interaction that permits the people together to achieve a spiritual breakthrough that they could not achieve in isolation. A sacrament therefore is a socially constituted or communal symbol of the presence of grace coming to fulfillment.⁵⁰⁰

Dulles repeats this phrase with a slight elaboration in the context of the ecclesial dimension of revelation. Beginning with a consideration of sacrament as “a socially constituted and communal symbol of grace,” he goes on to explain that this is so because, “as present and transforming individuals into a people,” the sacraments “bind the individual in new ways to the Church.”⁵⁰¹ Because the sign, or more properly the symbol, of the sacrament comes into being as an expression recognized and accepted by the community, and as a function of the shared history and tradition of the community, it functions symbolically only for persons within that social milieu. This understanding of sacrament is perhaps most clear when considering the seven individual sacraments as we are here, because under normal circumstances they require both a minister, as a representative of the community, a recipient that is also either a member of the community or, in the case of baptism, one seeking membership, and in addition to these two requirements also involves the larger community of faith gathered as witnesses, supporters and in some cases, fellow recipients of the sacramental grace. In the case of the Eucharist, quintessentially, not only is the sacramental sign socially constituted, but the sacramental effect itself is the achievement of community. The Eucharist effects the

⁵⁰⁰ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 67.

⁵⁰¹ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 220.

unity, in Christ, of the worshipping assembly with each other, with the faithful throughout the world, with the church triumphant, and with the faithful yet to come.

This communal character of sacrament serves to underwrite the importance of participation by the beholder of the symbol, if the symbol is to achieve its intended effect. The participation however is not simply participation in the symbol itself – an entrance into “the world of meaning opened up by the symbol,” as Dulles has described it⁵⁰² – as powerful as that may be, but furthermore a participation in the community whose shared history, tradition, and in the case of religious symbols, faith, allows the signified reality to come to expression for this community in and through the symbol. The requirement of participation calls attention back to the quality of the symbolic-communication of knowledge accomplished in divine revelation, as necessarily participatory knowledge. Without an active and willing participation in the symbol and in the community within which it functions and comes to expression, there is no receiving end of the revelatory transaction, and therefore no actual communication of knowledge or meaning.

Finally, Dulles addresses the notion of authenticity in the sacramental sign, positing that a sacrament is “a symbolic expression of the great mystery of grace and salvation centered in Jesus Christ.”⁵⁰³ Furthermore, if the sacrament is to be authentic in its signification of this reality truly present, it must be an “actual expression of the faith, hope and love of living men.”⁵⁰⁴ Without such authenticity the sacramental sign might very well exhibit some distinguishing characteristics of the symbol – it might, for example, point to a reality beyond itself, work to evoke meaning from the beholder, and

⁵⁰² Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 132-33.

⁵⁰³ Dulles, “Nature, Mission and Structure of the Church,” in *Vatican II: Renewal Within Tradition*, ed. Lamb and Levering (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 26-36 at 26-27.

⁵⁰⁴ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 69.

so on – but in failing to effect a *presence* of the salvific grace of Christ as manifest in the life of the recipient, it is not in fact a sacrament properly so-called. Sacramental signs are in this sense particularly potent symbols, including the power to solicit participation and evoke meaning, but far surpassing that power by expressing and manifesting the saving grace of Christ within the community and the individual recipient. But revelatory symbols, as symbolic expressions of the self-communication of God, are inherently authentic. When therefore a sacramental symbol exhibits the authenticity proper to a sacrament, it exhibits a revelatory character in effecting a true presence of the same divine grace it signifies.

b. Jesus Christ, the Primordial Sacrament

The seven individual sacraments just considered have, as has been shown, a variety of revelatory characteristics, or, perhaps more precisely, analogues to the nature of revelation. Yet in as much as the individual sacraments in many ways exhibit a revelatory character, the person of Christ as both “primordial sacrament”⁵⁰⁵ and “mediator and fullness of all revelation”⁵⁰⁶ coalesces these two concepts in an especially powerful and perfect way. The Incarnate Word, as personal, fulfills the designation “fullness of all revelation” by virtue of His existence as expression of the divine mystery in perfect union with human nature. Furthermore, he fulfills the requirement many theologians – including Dulles, Latourelle and Rahner – have made note of, namely, that in order to be revelation, the divine self-communication must be both offered and

⁵⁰⁵ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 71. Cf. note 478, above.

⁵⁰⁶ *Dei Verbum* 2.

accepted, an accomplished event.⁵⁰⁷ In Christ, by virtue of the hypostatic union of divinity and humanity, both the expression and the acceptance of the Word of God are united and simultaneously manifest.

The seven liturgical rites draw their individual sacramental efficacy not merely from the nature of their *sacramentum* (sacramental sign) as *Realsymbol*,⁵⁰⁸ even with all its profound and mysterious potency, but *a fortiori* from their institution by Christ who both sanctifies them and acts in and through them to communicate divine grace. Thus, as real symbols, the reality they express is the salvific grace of him who is the very fullness of revelation – the Incarnate Word of God. As Auer and Ratzinger have put it, a sacrament, considered as one of the seven liturgical rites, “above all, is a sign, instituted by Christ and efficacious by virtue of his action and his promise,” for the individual sacraments are “supernaturally and existentially united to Christ” and “ordered to Christ’s activity.”⁵⁰⁹

In this one can discern a distinction that has drawn importance from a sacramental theology emerging in the decades following Vatican II, which emphasizes the sacramental order as tripartite and hierarchical. According to this view Christ is the foundation of all sacramentality (the “primordial” or “fundamental” sacrament),⁵¹⁰ the

⁵⁰⁷ See, for example, Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 317-18, 325-27 et. al.; Rahner and Ratzinger, *Revelation and Tradition*, 15 ff.; Dulles, “Revelation and Discovery,” in *Theology and Discovery: Essays in Honor of Karl Rahner, S. J.*, ed. William J. Kelly, S.J. (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980), 1-29 at 23.

⁵⁰⁸ To borrow Rahner’s terminology. See “Theology of the Symbol,” 222-235.

⁵⁰⁹ Auer and Ratzinger, *A General Doctrine of the Sacraments*, 82.

⁵¹⁰ Herbert Vorgrimler gives a concise summary of the terminology used, “The designation ‘primordial sacrament’ was applied to the Church by Otto Semmelroth and Karl Rahner after the war. To avoid the terminological confusion occasioned by simultaneously calling Jesus Christ the ‘primordial sacrament’ and in order to highlight the enduring, qualitative difference between Jesus Christ and the Church, Semmelroth later referred to the Church as ‘root sacrament,’ while Rahner called it the ‘fundamental sacrament.’” See Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, 36.

church drawing its sacramentality from Christ, and the individual liturgical rites drawing theirs from the that of the church.⁵¹¹ This distinction is of particular merit in the context of the current discussion, namely, the revelatory potency of sacrament, to help clarify the difference between the revelatory potency of the liturgical signs which draw their power from a source external to and more primordial than themselves, and the revelatory potency of that source itself. With this distinction in mind, it becomes more evident that the term ‘revelatory’ ought not be applied univocally to every sacramental reality. The Incarnate Word of God, as the very basis in definition of both sacrament and revelation establishes the standard by which the revelatory modality within a sacrament is measured. The seven liturgical signs are, however, twice removed from this basis, for the church draws its sacramental efficacy – and therefore its revelatory potency as well – from the Incarnate Word, and the liturgical rites in turn function as communal expressions and manifestations of the sacramentality of the church: both as signs and

There is however some persistent terminological variance in the literature, particularly as regards the term “fundamental sacrament.” For example, at times Dulles applies this term to Christ (“Christ himself is the fundamental sacrament, for his visible human existence embodies, symbolically manifests, and communicates God’s powerful redemptive love,” *A Church to Believe In*, 30), but elsewhere describes his sacramentality as “primordial” rather than “fundamental” (“Christians are those who see and confess Jesus Christ as the supreme efficacious symbol – the primordial sacrament – of God’s saving love stretched out to all,” *Models of the Church*, 71); While L. M. Chauvet uses “fundamental sacrament” to designate both the Church (*Symbol and Sacrament*, 186) and “the liturgical assembly” (*ibid.*, 188).

Though one finds the sacramentality of Christ variously described, in more recent literature the designation “primordial sacrament” has referred nearly exclusively to Christ, not to the church. Using the primordial/fundamental couplet to designate, respectively, the sacramentality of Christ and the Church has proven an effective tool to describe and emphasize the derivative nature of the church’s sacramentality relative to that of its divine founder. Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, 15; Auer and Ratzinger, *A General Doctrine of the Sacraments*, 4 ff. Rahner, likewise, emphasizes this teaching throughout the ecclesiological articles of his *Theological Investigations*; see especially vol. X, Part I (“Ecclesiology”) and vol. XIV (“Ecclesiology, Questions in the Church, the Church in the World”).

⁵¹¹ This view is clearly operative, for example, throughout Chauvet’s *Symbol and Sacrament*. See chapter five, pp. 161-189, for one especially clear presentation. For a good summary of the evolution of sacramental theology surrounding and emerging from Vatican II, see Joseph Martos, *The Sacraments: An Interdisciplinary and Interactive Study* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 134-142.

instruments of divine grace given to and operative within the community, and as a more derivative form of revelation.

The sacrament of Christ – the tangible sign pointing to the divine mystery and the instrument by which saving grace has been made manifest and efficacious – is revelation in the truest sense. This, perhaps, bears repeating: even bearing in mind the teaching of Vatican II that Christ is the fullness of revelation, we may be allowed to sharpen the focus from the *person* of Christ to, more specifically, the *sacrament* of Christ as that which is most precisely revelation, if by revelation we are to understand, as Dulles so ardently contends, a divine communication that is both offered and received. For it is in and through the sacrament of Christ that what God offers in self-disclosure, expressed and manifest in the person of Christ, becomes an event of accomplished communication. The union of natures and the acceptance of the divine will in Christ is at once the expression and manifestation of God's self in material, created reality, the communication of the divine mystery to humanity, and the human response occurring definitively in a particular historical person.

The particularity of the sacrament of Christ points naturally toward a corresponding particularity in that sacrament's revelatory modality, for it is the singularity of divine and human, offer and response, within the person of Christ that presents most sublimely the revelatory event. According to Rahner, the importance of Christ's humanity, and the acceptance of God's self-gift encapsulated in the unity of human nature with divine nature, renders the Christ event a truly revelatory mediation: "The one God-man . . . is at once God himself as communicated, the human acceptance of the communication, and the final historical manifestation of this communication and

acceptance.”⁵¹² In uniting His divinity to human nature God makes a self-offer; in uniting human nature to the divine nature Christ effects an acceptance of that offer on behalf of all humanity. In choosing to embrace the divine will, to conform the human will to that of the Father and follow it through to the cross, Christ accepts the offer of divine self-communication in its entirety, both the gifts and the demands of communion with God. In accomplishing the resurrection, God, in turn, demonstrates a definitive and historical acceptance of the response of faith by humankind, in Jesus.

Dulles echoes this teaching in considering the relationship of the sacrament of the church to its foundation in the sacrament of Christ. Not only is Jesus Christ “the sacrament of God as turned toward man . . . [representing] for us God’s loving acceptance of man and his rehabilitation of man,” but also,

as Servant of God he is the supreme sacrament of man’s faithful response to God and of God’s recognition of that fidelity. . . . He is simultaneously the sacrament of God’s self-gift and of man’s fully obedient acceptance. The mutual acceptance of God and man, initially signified by the history of Israel, reaches its consummation in Christ’s cross and resurrection.⁵¹³

For Dulles, in fact, the conjoining of divine offer and human acceptance in the person of Christ is a necessary element of His sacramentality. “In order to become the kind of sign he must be,” Dulles explains, “he must appear as the sign of God’s redemptive love extended toward all mankind, and of the response of all mankind to that redemptive love.”⁵¹⁴ This is necessary in order for Christ to both contain the grace signified and

⁵¹² Rahner and Ratzinger, *Revelation and Tradition*, 15.

⁵¹³ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 67-68. See also Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, 46: “A sacrament . . . is a visible sign of an invisible grace. It contains and transmits the grace that it signifies. All these characteristics of sacrament are preeminently verified in Christ, and, after him, in the Church.”

⁵¹⁴ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 68. While Dulles seems to prefer the category of ‘symbol’ over ‘sacrament’ when considering the communication of divine revelation (cf. *Models of Revelation*, 158), here he is speaking specifically of the sacrament of Christ, from which the Church draws and understands its own nature as sacrament.

signify the grace that is contained. It is not enough that the humanity of Christ is a symbol of the divinity with which it is united, or that it is a self-expression of God. In order for the person of Christ to function sacramentally, that same humanity must also be a symbol of humankind, recapitulated in Christ, responding to that offer in faith and obedience. In achieving this sacramental function, Christ likewise accomplishes within himself the revelatory event.⁵¹⁵

Chauvet claims an especially close relationship between the act of revealing and the nature of symbol, particularly the type of efficacious symbol which distinguishes the sacrament: “Such is precisely one of the characteristics of symbol,” he writes, “it effects only by revealing; conversely, it reveals only by effecting.”⁵¹⁶ Rahner explains further: “Any symbolic reality . . . is an object or event so structured that it can, as a clue, offer insight into a deeper reality not knowable, at least with the same depth or intensity, without reliance upon itself. The whole form of Christ’s human existence, from his Incarnation to his Cross and exaltation, is held to be a ‘realizing’ symbol of God, present and active in this man.”⁵¹⁷ By applying his comments broadly to “any symbolic reality” – a category to which sacrament most surely belongs – and emphasizing its ability to offer insight into otherwise unknowable reality, Rahner is reinforcing the connection between sacramental efficacy and precisely the symbolic communication of meaning we have come to recognize as revelation.

⁵¹⁵ Edward Schillebeeckx further reinforces this notion, arguing that Christ “is not only the offer of divine love to man made visible but, at the same time, as prototype (or primordial model), he is the supreme realization of the response of human love to this divine offer.” Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, 18. Dulles would add that Christ also contains within himself the realization of God’s acceptance of humanity’s faith-response, as already noted (see note 513, above).

⁵¹⁶ Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 85.

⁵¹⁷ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 159.

Finally, a consideration of the sacramental effect of the sacrament of Christ can perhaps shed further light on this primordial sacramental reality's particular revelatory modality. In the preface to his 1992 reprint of *Models of Revelation*, Dulles quotes approvingly from Henri de Lubac's commentary on Vatican II's *Dei Verbum*, which describes the sacrament of Christ as effecting not only a divine presence or salvific grace as is commonly the language used with reference to the individual sacraments, but also as effecting "God's self-communication" – the phrase we have returned to again and again to designate an event of divine revelation.⁵¹⁸ De Lubac goes on to make the connection between sacramentality and revelation within Christ more explicit: this self-communication of God, in Christ, is "the efficacious sign and sacrament whereby God enters into communion with humankind."⁵¹⁹ This effect could be broken down into a number of discrete sacramental effects, e.g., the realization of redemption, the inauguration of the Kingdom of God, the personal encounter with God, the fulfillment of God's promise of salvation, the restoration of Israel, and so on, but the restoration of communion, and the accompanying divine self-communication, are sufficiently broad to include all of these.

Though there can be little doubt that Christ came to restore the communion, broken by sin, between God and humanity, in order for the Christ-event to be properly sacramental there must be a sign as well as the effect or instrumentality. The sacrament of Christ must both signify a full, perfect and realized communion with God as well as be instrumental in causing such communion to exist between God and the rest of the human race. This is what was accomplished in the Incarnation, when that full and perfect

⁵¹⁸ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, ix, referring to Henri de Lubac, S. J., *La Révélation divine*, 3rd revised and expanded ed. (Paris: Cerf, 1983).

⁵¹⁹ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, ix.

communion of divine and human was realized within the person of Jesus Christ. The life and ministry, and especially the death and resurrection, of Jesus signifies for us the profoundly perfect communion with God that is possible and awaits the faithful. At the same time, the gift of the church given by Christ to the world both demonstrates the ongoing historical reality of that communion, and exists as a continuing sacramental effect as it perpetuates and builds the Kingdom of God on Earth through its ministries, the body of Christ through evangelization and baptism, and intimate communion with God and each other through the Eucharist.

As Chauvet has said, the symbol reveals by effecting, and this sacramental symbol does so quintessentially. The effect of restored communion between God and humanity, and the effect of the communication of divine mystery itself, in Christ, to humanity, reveal the mystery of God with a perfection infinitely surpassing any other sacramental reality. The sacrament of Christ reveals the personal nature of God by effecting communion, by effecting in the Incarnation God's perfect self-communication and, among many other things, the love God has for the world. Symbolic self-communication is, of course, subject to partial and imperfect reception and acceptance on the part of finite humanity as is evidenced even in the person of Jesus Himself, whom the evangelists depict as growing in self-knowledge and understanding throughout His life and ministry. As symbol, however, it is also unlimited – as two thousand years of ongoing reception eloquently attest.

Three categories of sacramental reality comprise a sacramental worldview such as that embraced by Roman Catholicism. First, there is the primordial sacrament, the ground and source of all sacramentality, the person of Christ Himself; second, there is the

‘fundamental sacrament,’ the church, which draws its sacramentality from Christ; and finally, there is the individual sacramental sign, which, while always an instance of Christ acting through the ministry of the church to give grace, is nonetheless an act of the church, drawing its own sacramentality from the church. Having now considered the revelatory nature and modality of the primordial sacrament, Christ, and the seven individual sacraments – and highlighted the qualitative distinction between the two – there remains only the task of demonstrating a similar revelatory character of the final sacramental reality, the church.

However, before attending to that argument – the principle claim of this study – a few more pieces must first be set in place. First, it is necessary to examine the relationship between sacrament and revelation from the other side – not only is there a revelatory character to the reality of sacrament, but likewise there is a sacramental character to the reality of revelation. Furthermore it is necessary to look closely at the foundation provided by Dulles’ understanding of the church as an essentially sacramental reality, for the recognition of the revelatory efficacy of the symbol’s communicative power.

2. The Sacramental Nature of Revelation

Herbert Vorgrimler suggests that there is, and can be, no satisfactory definition of sacraments in general, in fact no *concept* of sacraments in general, because there are no “general” sacraments – only specific, concrete sacraments.⁵²⁰ Nevertheless, in the same work Vorgrimler himself recognizes that the entirety of our relationship with God is subject to a sacramental principle, for “God’s revelation, the knowledge of God, God’s

⁵²⁰ Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, 43.

communication of the divine will and God's presence are given to us humans only through mediation, and are not immediate to us."⁵²¹ This mediation, he goes on to say, is accomplished specifically through persons and events: through material, created reality functioning symbolically because recognized as symbol by the community of faith.

There are two sacramental conceptions in particular that have been important for understanding sacrament in a broader sense: a view of sacrament as a special class of symbol, and a view of sacrament that emphasizes the unity of word and event. In each case the conception highlights the sacramental principle or structure that characterizes all of the history of God's interaction with humanity; furthermore, it provides some basis for applying the concept of 'sacrament' beyond the seven specific liturgical rites, to the person of Christ and to the church.⁵²²

The first of these two concepts, the view of sacrament as a special class of symbol, exhibits what may be termed a "presentative efficacy" which separates it from mere signs or indicators and from symbols which are not properly considered sacraments.⁵²³ This "presentative efficacy" is the power of the symbol to effect a presence of the divine, transcendent mystery through the instrumentality of its material

⁵²¹ Ibid., 8-9. This does not necessarily imply the term 'sacrament' can only be properly applied to the seven liturgical rites defined by Trent; an understanding of Christ as sacrament or the Church as sacrament are also specific and concrete instances of sacrament.

⁵²² A classic example of the former is Schillebeeckx, *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*. The application to the church was initiated most notably by Karl Rahner, and the *nouvelle théologie* scholars such as Yves Congar, and Henri de Lubac, and institutionalized by incorporation in the documents of Vatican II.

⁵²³ In coining the term I am intending to follow Dulles' conceptual categories by which he distinguishes "presentative symbols" from merely "representative symbols." For Dulles, a presentative symbol is "one in which the God who is symbolized is present and operative, somewhat as a human person is present in the body and its gestures," therefore, "Inasmuch as Jesus is the Incarnate Word, his humanity is something more than a representative symbol. Rather, it is a *presentative* symbol" (cf. Dulles, "Symbolic Structure of Revelation," 68. According to this usage, sacramental signs are presentative symbols, while representative symbols would more nearly describe a non-sacramental sign. My term "presentative efficacy," therefore, is simply meant to indicate the extent to which a given symbol functions as a presentative, rather than merely representative, symbol.

sign, to a particular community at a particular historical place and time. From such an understanding comes such traditional definitions of sacrament as that given by Trent: “a symbol of a sacred thing . . . a visible form of an invisible grace.”⁵²⁴ Dulles clarifies that while “a sacrament is in the first place, a sign of grace,” it is not just any sign. The sacrament’s unique efficacy is indeed intimately bound up with the sign, but does not merely accompany the sign nor remain external to the sign. Rather, in the case of a *sacramental sign*, it is “a sign of something really present. . . . an efficacious sign; the sign itself produces or intensifies that of which it is a sign. Thanks to the sign, the reality signified achieves an existential depth; it emerges into solid, tangible existence.”⁵²⁵

The second conception of sacrament is concerned with emphasizing the unity of word and event, as those two elements combine to effect a presence of grace and a revelation of the economy of salvation. According to Dulles, this understanding of sacrament led the fathers of Vatican II to incorporate a recognition of the symbolic or sacramental structure of revelation into its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*.⁵²⁶ The sacramental language of the council fathers is unmistakable:

This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them.⁵²⁷

⁵²⁴ Council of Trent, Session XIII, “Decree on the Most Holy Eucharist”, chapter 3 (*DS* 876). This text is sometimes translated as a sign, rather than symbol, of sacred reality, though the Latin reads “*symbolum esse rei sacrae et invisibilis gratiae formam visibilem*.”

⁵²⁵ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 66.

⁵²⁶ Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 73.

⁵²⁷ *Dei Verbum* 2.

Rene Latourelle, in a commentary on *De Verbum* added as an appendix to his monograph on revelation, elaborates on the sacramental nature of the revelation described by the council in terms of “works” and “words”:

By insisting on the works and words as the constitutive elements of revelation and upon their intimate union, the Council emphasizes the historical and sacramental character of revelation: events explained by the word of the prophets, Christ, and the apostles. . . . The sacramental character of revelation appears in the interpenetration and mutual support that exists between word and work. God performs the act of salvation and at the same time develops its meaning; He intervenes in history and tells us of the import of His intervention; He acts and comments on His action.⁵²⁸

Writing his monograph during the decade just prior to Vatican II, Latourelle claims pointedly that “the structure of revelation is sacramental: facts, events, enlightened by word.” The events of history become revelation only when divinely interpreted by the word of the prophet, for the prophetic word “explains the event and proposes it to Israel’s faith as an event of salvation, attested by God.”⁵²⁹ Latourelle in fact speaks of revelation throughout this work in specifically sacramental terms, claiming that the word of God (revelation) “effects what it signifies . . . [it] is an active, efficacious, creative word.”⁵³⁰ Finally, Dulles, in characteristic fashion, draws out the connection Latourelle has alluded to without making explicit: Christ, as the primordial sacrament *and* the fullness of revelation, is living evidence of the sacramental nature of revelation. As Dulles puts it, “the sacramental vision of the Church has immense importance for the theology of revelation. Looking upon the church as the symbolic presence of Christ, who is himself

⁵²⁸ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 462.

⁵²⁹ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 349.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*, 318.

the symbolic presence of the Word in human flesh, this vision preserves the realism of revelation.”⁵³¹

The essentially sacramental nature of revelation is of special concern for Dulles, naturally enough, as his insistence on the mediation of revelation by symbols has already strongly suggested a sacramental nature. The fact that the divine, noumenal reality communicated by both sacrament and revelatory symbol is not extrinsic to their respective signs, but rather contained within the sign itself strikes Dulles as particularly significant: “Just as sacraments are said to contain the grace which they signify, so the word of revelation embodies and makes mysteriously present the reality to which it refers – the reality of God communicating Himself in love.”⁵³² With echoes of Latourelle, Dulles also sees strong evidence for the sacramentality of revelation in the relationship of prophecy (word) and salvation history (event): “The word of God is always somehow sacramental, for it symbolically makes God present, and the sacrament, which is the symbol of God’s real presence in the assembly, never comes to pass without the word of proclamation.”⁵³³ In this Dulles is not alone: in addition to Latourelle who, as we have seen has deeply influenced Dulles, Chauvet also argues that Scripture, as a paradigm of revelation, is essentially sacramental.⁵³⁴

B. Sacramental Ecclesiology: Foundation of the Symbolic-Mediation Approach to Revelation

Dulles’ sacramental ecclesiology was a serious theologoumenon in its own right, occupying a privileged place in his theology throughout his career. But the sacramental

⁵³¹ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 227.

⁵³² Dulles, “Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 72-73.

⁵³³ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 172.

⁵³⁴ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 213-227, chapter six, part III: “The Sacramentality of Scripture.”

view of the church also had important applications to Dulles' other principal research and publishing interest – the theology of revelation. Though Dulles certainly did not consider a sacramental view of the church to be sufficient, of itself, to model the full reality of the ecclesial mystery, nonetheless he clearly found in this model special potential as a basis for a systematic ecclesiology. A recognition of the usefulness, even necessity, of the sacramental model for presenting a balanced and adequate ecclesiology reinforced Dulles' developing symbolic realism and supported his insistence on the nature of revelation as necessarily mediated.

Dulles was unequivocal on the issue of the mediation of revelation. The nature of revelation as an event of communication, which to be completed requires a recipient, necessitates a medium of communication appropriate to that recipient. In the case of God's revelation to humanity, that medium of communication must be part of the created order in order for it to be comprehended, even partially or imperfectly, by created beings. Further, in order for that medium of communication to do justice to the divine mystery being communicated, it must be able to communicate a plenitude of meaning. Thus Dulles was powerfully drawn to the notion of symbol, as he carefully researched and defined it according to several key properties, as the only real candidate to mediate the communication of God's very self to a finite, human mind. This is not to say that it is impossible for God to effect His self-communication to humankind by non-symbolic means; rather to observe that, in point of fact, in the absence of symbol and its peculiar mode of communication, divine revelation does not occur.

This understanding finds, perhaps, its greatest challenge in the mystical tradition, or what Dulles has termed the "experiential model" of revelation. This view of revelation

is by definition the result of a direct and unmediated encounter with the divine, built upon an assertion of a mystical union between the human soul and the divine mystery that is perceived without recourse to mediation. Meister Eckhart, for example, describes two categories of mystical union with God: a perfect union of the human will with the will of God, in mutual exchange of love; and the union between God and the human person that takes on an identity of its own.⁵³⁵ Dulles describes those who hold an experiential view of revelation as affirming “the possibility of an unmediated perception of God or of the transcendent through interior, spiritual union,”⁵³⁶ however, he is quick to point out that such a view is an extreme example of this “model.” More moderate adherents such as John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila “are best interpreted as affirming that God makes himself known by producing signs and effects of his presence in the soul.”⁵³⁷ Thus, far from opposing the symbolic approach to revelation, the mystical approach “complements and enriches it,” according to Dulles. The special modality of the symbol, I would add – particularly its power to evoke meaning – is well suited indeed to complement and enrich the revelation given via mystical encounter. The power of the symbol to evoke meaning enables it to draw a divine communication forth from the inarticulate depths of the mystic’s awareness to the level of cognitive expressiveness. To the extent that a true mystical union with God has been achieved, the power of the symbol to evoke meaning, and the “inexhaustible brood of meanings” that can be evoked will be realized.

Revelation as the self-disclosure of God to his creation must furthermore be a disclosure of the divine mystery *in toto*. Because God is utterly simple, God cannot give,

⁵³⁵ Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2001), 147.

⁵³⁶ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 148.

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*

or communicate only part of the divine reality. Revelation is therefore more than the communication of knowledge *about* God; it is the communication, however imperfect, of the divine mystery itself. One might reasonably object at this point that the totality of the divine mystery certainly has not been communicated to humanity, but this is not the result of a partial gift on the part of God; it is the result of a limited capacity to receive the gift of God on the part of humanity. A sacramental understanding of the church, emphasizing the importance of created, tangible, perceptible reality – symbol, to be precise – in the communication of grace, lays the groundwork for approaching God’s gift of self in revelation as likewise comprising both a mystical gift and a symbolic medium of communication.

In his most mature reflections on the subject of revelation Dulles had honed his thought on the use of symbol, as a particular element of the created order uniquely suited to the communication of the divine mystery, to the point that he could insist not only that all revelation is mediated, but that all revelation is mediated *by symbol*. The understanding of the church as sacrament began earlier than his focused research on revelation, but matured in parallel with it,⁵³⁸ and solidified in Dulles’ thought the necessity of holding the sign-element and the communication of grace together. This understanding is what led to a natural embrace of the communication of grace (the gift of God’s self) mediated by the created order, via symbol.

⁵³⁸ Dulles did publish “Paul Tillich and the Bible,” in which the theology of revelation plays a central role. However the focus of this article was not on Dulles’ own theology of revelation so much as the distinctions between Tillich’s approach to the Biblical revelation and that of the Roman Catholic Church. Publications which present Dulles’ own theology of revelation, even in its earliest forms, begin appearing just after Vatican II, for example: “The Theology of Revelation,” (1964) and “Symbol, Myth and the Biblical Revelation,” (1966). Dulles had already developed a strong appreciation for a sacramental ecclesiology, even if his own thoughts on the matter were not yet fully mature, from his reading of Rahner, Congar and de Lubac, among others, in the decade leading up to the council.

For Dulles, therefore, a sacramental ecclesiology was foundational for the development of his theology of revelation as mediated by symbolic communication. Two final points will help clarify this logical progression: First, that the symbolic communication of the grace of God is sacramental; and second, that divine revelation, mediated by the sacramental communication of God's grace, comes through the church.

1. Sacrament as Symbolic Communication of Divine Grace

Dulles recognizes that the term 'sacrament' as it has been traditionally understood and used, connotes the communication of sanctifying grace, or grace leading to sanctification.⁵³⁹ The notion of revelation as a divine self-manifestation, while certainly fitting within a common understanding of grace as a free, unmerited gift, is a rather different concept of grace than that usually understood to be received in the church's seven liturgical sacraments. Still, the concept of sacrament as a symbolic expression of divine grace, could easily be expanded to apply to a much broader concept of grace. It is no great stretch to apply the notion of sacrament to the symbolic expression of God's self-disclosure, for certainly this disclosure, preeminently in the Incarnation but also in creation, in the great events of salvation history, in the inspired written record of the faith of the chosen people and the people of the new covenant, and in the magisterial teachings comprising Sacred Tradition, is a free and unmerited gift of God. In *Models of Revelation* Dulles tends to prefer 'symbol' to 'sacrament' when speaking of the communication of revelation, writing: "For the communication of revelation, symbol is perhaps a better term than sacrament. If we take the term symbol in a strongly realistic sense, meaning a sign in which the thing signified is really present, Christ may be called

⁵³⁹ Ibid., 158.

the symbol of God par excellence.”⁵⁴⁰ But of course taking the term symbol in such a “strongly realistic sense” is for all practical purposes tantamount to making it synonymous with sacrament. “A sign in which the thing signified is really present” lacks only an awareness that the presence is effective in order to be a fully sacramental understanding, and this awareness is effectively intimated. The characterization of Jesus Christ as the *symbol* par excellence rather than the *sacrament* par excellence further supports the blurred line between the two concepts in this instance. Elsewhere in his writings, including later in this same work, Dulles does not hesitate to describe, even emphasize, the sacramentality of the person of Christ – even within the context of clarifying the symbolic nature of the communication of revelation: “The time of revelation is par excellence the time of Jesus Christ, in whose person and life revelation found its supreme symbol. Insofar as he is the incarnation of the eternal Word, he is a real symbol; insofar as he communicates grace through the gift of his Spirit, he is an efficacious symbol. As a real, efficacious symbol Christ is, as already mentioned, the sacrament of God.”⁵⁴¹

2. Ecclesial Sacrament as Mediation of Revelation

The notion that revelation is given to the church rather than to individual believers can be a bit unsettling, and is certainly not universally accepted.⁵⁴² Many believers have

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 158.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., 232.

⁵⁴² In our culture, in fact, it may be that such a notion is becoming a minority view. It is not at all uncommon to hear an otherwise sincere believer eschew the necessity, or even usefulness, of the Church with a proclamation such as “I’m spiritual, but not religious.” Such a sentiment only makes sense in the context of a belief that revelatory knowledge of God and salvific grace can be received directly, without ecclesial mediation. The evangelical Protestant emphasis on a personal relationship with Christ as the basis for salvation and upon which the life of faith rests and grows would also reject the notion of an ecclesial mediation of revelation.

had powerful experiences of God's grace that seem to have occurred entirely without church involvement or knowledge. Dulles himself speaks of such an encounter, early in his journey of faith. In his spiritual autobiography, *A Testimonial to Grace*, he recounts the moment of his initial conversion, brought about by a sudden realization that all of creation acts according to an end to which it has been ordered by its creator. He describes this realization as a thought which "came to me suddenly, with all the strength and novelty of a revelation."⁵⁴³ Two clarifications are in order here: first, Dulles is fully aware of, and distinguishes between, private revelation and public revelation; second, even in the case of private revelation there is an ecclesial mediation, even if the recipient of the revelation is unaware of it.

Dulles speaks of public revelation as "a divine manifestation directed to a community of faith."⁵⁴⁴ This understanding grows out of and is important to his doctrine of revelation as mediated by symbol. For symbols only function *as symbols* within a given community. Religious symbols, therefore, those symbols which communicate divine revelation, only communicate truths of a religious nature – truths concerning the mystery of God, within a community of faith. Consider for example the great symbol of the Christian faith, the cross. The cross has been used as a simple sign, as a powerful symbol of purely secular realities, and as a specifically religious symbol that has the power to communicate something of the divine mystery. The cross has been used as a simple sign or indicator, for example, in mathematics to indicate a sum operation, or on a road sign to indicate a four-way intersection. The cross was used by the Roman Empire as a very potent symbol, specifically chosen to be a highly visible reminder of the

⁵⁴³ Dulles, *A Testimonial to Grace*, 36.

⁵⁴⁴ Dulles, "The Symbolic Structure of Revelation," 57.

punishment awaiting traitors or other criminals: within this community it was a symbol of Roman imperial power, of cruelty, death and dishonor. Within the Christian community the cross functioned as an even more powerful symbol, but with a radically different meaning. Christians saw in the instrument by which Christ conquered sin and death, a symbol of life, of salvation, of the inestimable love God has for his people, of the power of peace and humility over might and violence, and so on. Thus Dulles' insistence upon revelation as always and necessarily mediated, and mediated specifically by symbolic communication, requires that the event of revelation occur within the community for which the revelatory symbols function as symbols of the divine mystery.

But what of private revelation? Can it not be that revelations such as that described by Dulles in his conversion story, or similar moments of extraordinary experience of grace take place without reliance on community? For Dulles, the community of faith is still the context within which the revelation event becomes, actually, "revelation." Before this context is provided by the church such an experience can be powerfully moving, exciting the senses and overpowering the intellect, but it falls to the Christian community to provide it with the interpretive context by which it becomes revelatory. Consider the case of the prophets of Israel who were graced with a very specific personal revelation and a corresponding commission. The message of the prophets would have been meaningless without the context of the people of God, their covenant relationship with God, and their faith; further, the revelation was given not for their own benefit but for the benefit of the community. The divine locution derives both its meaning and its purpose from the community of faith.

The same holds true for the great mystics of the Christian tradition. Though they certainly accrued great spiritual benefits from the private revelation personally, such revelation only makes sense within the context of that long Christian tradition, informed by the Scriptures and the constant teaching of the church, and finds its purpose in the spiritual growth and development of the community as a whole. In the case of a conversion experience such as Dulles described, the thought that came to him “with all the strength and novelty of a revelation” – his private revelation – was far from the end of the story. This only convinced him of the existence of God and the God-given purpose of all of creation, including himself. It remained for him to find, within the community of faith, the meaning of that revelation, and the specifics of his own teleology.

a. Principle Recipient of Revelation (Subject of Faith)

The church has been described in this regard as both the subject, and the object, of faith. In the following section I will qualify more carefully the understanding of the church as “object of faith;” but first it will be helpful to briefly consider the church in its capacity as a believing community. It is important to bear in mind that the church thus characterized is a living, spiritual entity – expressed and manifest in created reality, yes – but expressing a unified spiritual body. This body of Christ worships as one, prays as one, and believes as one body. It is in this sense that the church is a subject of faith. It is the worshipping subject, the believing agent. The church cannot teach, cannot proclaim, cannot pray, until it has received, believed, and accepted the grace and the revelation of God.

The hierarchy of the church has, through the ages, received the revelation contained in certain writings and accepted these as sacred, inspired Scripture. In a less

official and solemn way, but no less critical to the decision, the worshipping community as a whole – the Bishop and all the flock gathered together in worship – accepted some of these early writings as revelation, and rejected others. In the same way, the hierarchy of the church receives the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the deliberations and decisions of ecumenical councils, but this inspiration which defines the reception of on-going revelation does not cease with the promulgation of the conciliar documents. As it is said, “The council has ended; the council has just begun.” The period of reception, interpretation, and appropriation of the conciliar teachings is no less a part of the church acting as believing subject.

b. Sign and Instrument of Revelation (Object of Faith)

Special care must be exercised when designating the church an “object of faith,” so as to avoid the suggestion that it is proper to believe in the church in the same manner as one believes in God. Henri de Lubac takes great pains to describe the appropriate relationship of the believer to each of these realities, and distinguish them clearly, appealing to *The Roman Catechism* to stress the distinction: “As regards the three Persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we believe in them in such a way as to place our faith in them. But now, changing our mode of expression, we declare that we believe the holy Church and not in the holy Church.”⁵⁴⁵

Dulles is well aware of the problems associated with applying this title or designation to the church, and yet pushes the issue rather close to the edge by publishing a book under the title of *A Church to Believe in: Discipleship and the Dynamics of Faith*.

⁵⁴⁵ Henri de Lubac, *The Christian Faith: An Essay on the Structure of the Apostles' Creed* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 171. English translation of *La Foi chrétienne: Essai sur la structure du Symbole des Apôtres* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1969).

In the preface, Dulles suggests that the title was intentionally crafted to contain a certain double entendre: the church is a community within which one exercises one's faith in the one true God (subject of faith), and yet the church can, under certain circumstances, warrant faith in itself as well (object of faith). Still, it is not suggested that the faith one puts in the church is the same as the faith one puts in God. Thus while Dulles does suggest that "under the second aspect [of the title] the church is viewed as object of belief," he quickly admits, in the next sentence, "theologically speaking, God alone is the object of faith."⁵⁴⁶ This does not preclude, however, belief in the person of Jesus Christ because of the "altogether unique" way in which God is present in Him. The presence of God (through Christ) in the church is of course not the same as the presence of God in Jesus: the church is, Dulles makes clear, neither sinless nor divine. However, "belief in Christ is inseparable from a certain belief in the Church as the witness through which he makes himself accessible."⁵⁴⁷

This is, perhaps, not technically a belief in the church so much as an acceptance or reception of the testimony or witness of the church based on a belief that the church is a reliable and truthful witness. In this sense belief in the church is belief in the truth and authority of the church's testimony and living witness. It may be compared to one person telling another "I believe in you" as an expression of faith and confidence in the other's will and ability to succeed, to keep his or her promises, and in his or her reliability as a matter of course, habit or nature. "According to Christian belief," Dulles concludes, "Christ and the Holy Spirit are really present in the Church so that it becomes a kind of

⁵⁴⁶ Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, ix.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid.

sacrament. As the ancient Roman creed expressed it, ‘I believe in the Holy Spirit in the holy Church.’⁵⁴⁸

This reliable witness of the church, the witness through which Christ makes himself accessible, is a witness to God’s self-communication, i.e., revelation, given and received within the community of faith. Such revelation however, whether given to a single member of the community, to certain groups within it, or to the entire church, is not given solely for the benefit of the recipient. It is given for the benefit of all people, and as we have seen, it cannot be received with a reliable meaning outside of the context of the believing community. It therefore falls to this community of faith, the church, to both receive and interpret the divine self-disclosure and also to work to make that revelation a truly salvific grace for all. This task can be usefully broken down into two parts: the communication of revelation to members of the community of faith, and the communication of revelation to all members of the human race.

1) Communication of Revelation to Believers

The communication of revelation, received by the church, to the community of believers is perhaps something of an overlapping notion. Because the members of the community of faith all participate, in one way or another, in the reception of revelation by the community, there is a significant communication of revelation to believers already. However, the process is frequently protracted and messy. It is rarely, if ever, the case that magisterial teachings are unanimously and immediately embraced. There is rather a process of catechesis, prayer, and reflection on new teachings, within the context of lived experience and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that ultimately results in a

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

communication of revelation to individual believers that may be only part of what the magisterial authority itself envisioned, or may go beyond that vision.

The communication of revelation to believers, of course, is not limited to this sort of “top down” schema whereby the laity are constrained to the role of passive recipients. While the meaning of a divine self-disclosure cannot be reliably received and interpreted without the shared history and tradition which gives meaning and power to the system of revelatory symbols within the community, and the specific charisms of the community’s hierarchy which ensure a reliable and authoritative interpretation of those symbolic communications, the event of revelation itself is often given to individuals or smaller groups within the larger community. As examples one could mention the mystical experiences just considered above, the dramatic messages of Marian apparitions or locutions, the extraordinary events of divine encounter such as the stigmata, or powerful healings occurring during a communal service or as the result of an individual reception of the sacrament of anointing. Such events are revelatory symbols given to groups or individuals within the larger community of faith, but the community as a whole gives them meaning, receives them in faith, and is forever changed by them.

2) Communication of Revelation to the World

The church is furthermore called to be a sign and instrument of the grace of salvation to all humanity, to all nations and peoples. In so far as the church lives in accordance with the received, revealed truths, it functions as such a sign. In so far as the church functions as a sign, or more precisely, symbol, of the grace of God active within it, it will also be effective as an instrument drawing all peoples into closer communion with God. In so far as it fails, officially, institutionally, or in the faith expressions of

individual members to demonstrate integrity between its teachings and its actions however, it will function as a countersign or, at best, an empty sign and the instrumentality will be neutered or even negative. To the extent that the church conducts itself with integrity, it is “the universal sacrament of salvation,” giving testimony and living witness to the world of the revelation of God. While certainly “the Spirit blows where the Spirit wills,” and the church does not dictate or limit the ways in which God chooses to reveal himself to individuals or to the world, it remains true that the meaning of that revelation is found within the context of the believing community. And until a revelatory symbol has real, inexhaustible meaning for the recipient, it has not yet achieved itself as revelation, not yet been received as divine self-communication.

C. Revelatory Modality of the Church, the Fundamental Sacrament

Now, at last, having the preparatory pieces all in place, it is possible to conclude what was begun in this chapter’s initial section. There the revelatory nature of sacrament was examined under two forms: the revelatory modality of the seven liturgical signs, and the revelatory modality of Christ as the primordial sacrament. Now, coming full circle we are ready to consider the revelatory nature of sacrament under a third and final form – the revelatory modality of the fundamental sacrament, the church. In the opening section of the chapter I considered at some length the distinction in nature and revelatory modality between the sacramentality of Christ, and that of the individual sacraments. It is not the case, I argued there, that every sacramental reality is an event of revelation; the sacrament of Christ is special in this regard. As the revelatory modality of the fundamental sacrament, the church, is elaborated below, however, I will argue further that the sacrament of Christ is not altogether unique in its revelatory modality. The

fundamental sacrament of the church shares in the particular revelatory characteristics and modality of Christ which are qualitatively distinct from the revelatory modality of the individual signs or other elements of a sacramental reality more broadly defined.

In an uncharacteristically explicit passage from 1992, Dulles specifically equates the symbolic nature of church with the symbolic nature of both the Incarnation and the Word of God, which is to say in Dulles' parlance, the self-communication of God:⁵⁴⁹

Theological reflection begins by considering God's outward manifestation in works such as creation, the incarnation, grace, the church, the sacraments, and the word of God. It culminates in a study of the inner self-communication of God, who exists eternally as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In each of these cases, I maintain, the communication is symbolic and evocative.⁵⁵⁰

This is particularly significant because in each case it is the *symbolic nature* of the given reality that renders it capable of functioning as a revelatory mediation. That last term is important, bearing repetition and some further explication: the realities just mentioned, because of their symbolic natures, function within the community of faith as revelatory mediations. This is to be carefully distinguished from what our ears are perhaps more accustomed to: mediators of revelation. While Dulles himself very often, perhaps even habitually, spoke of revelation as symbolically mediated, mediated by symbol, or the like, and, in presenting his thought I have followed this language at certain points in this dissertation, nonetheless the concept to which he applied the term and with which I am

⁵⁴⁹ Dulles, among others (Rahner, Latourelle, for example) defines revelation freely as the self-communication of God; the communication of God's self to humanity; or in some cases, to the human intellect. I am aware that this definition is also a common description of divine grace but while certain circumstances may require the maintenance of subtle distinctions along these lines, my purposes here do not. Revelation as a gift from God is clearly grace and, similarly, it is difficult to imagine how God could give Godself to humanity without that gift entailing something of an unveiling of the divine nature. Latourelle puts it simply: "Revelation must be called an effect of God's good will (*placuit*). It is *grace*." *Theology of Revelation*, 458; Cf. Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 172; Rahner, "What is a Sacrament?," in *Ecclesiology, Questions in the Church, the Church in the World*, Theological Investigations XIV (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 135-148 at 141.

⁵⁵⁰ Dulles, "From Symbol to System," 45 (emphasis added).

here concerned is more accurately represented as a mediation than as a mediator, or less yet, mediating. It is more accurately considered a *mediation* – a revelatory mediation, specifically – than a mediator. What, specifically, conceptualizing the sacramental symbol as a revelatory mediation accomplishes is to emphasize the inescapable fact that the mediation *is* the revelation.

This is consistent with, and follows from Dulles' insistence that revelation, properly so-called, is an accomplished event. What exists as the divine will to self-disclose, prior to the reception (however partial or imperfect) of that which God has willed to make known concerning himself is not yet, for Dulles, "revelation." The result of the activity of mediating is a communication or reception (again, however imperfect or partial it may be); in revelation-as-transaction perspective, this result of the mediating activity ("mediation") is the accomplishment of the event that is properly called "revelation." A revelatory symbol (whether the church, or some other such symbol), has revelatory potential because of its potential to function symbolically, and act upon one who participates in its symbolic reality, to achieve communication. The reception of the communication contained *in potentia* in the revelatory symbol begins with a divine initiative of self-disclosure and involves a reception – even if only tacit, initially, before gradually achieving a certain degree of explicit awareness, and even if only partial and imperfect (with the exception of the revelatory symbol of Christ) prior to the eschaton. That reception, that movement effected by the symbol, is the result of the mediating activity of the symbol; it is "mediation," and it is also the accomplishment of the revelatory event. This is what is meant when Dulles speaks of "revelation as symbolic mediation," or, alternatively, a "symbolic-mediation approach to revelation."

It is not as if the symbol stands between God and humanity, receiving from God his revelation and in turn passing this revelation on to the community of faith. Rather, when revelation is comprehended as the gift of God's very self, it can no longer be conceived of in separation from God; it cannot be imagined as passing through an intermediate reality en route to the human person or community. God, as person, could no more approach humanity in this way as one human person, seeking to enter into relationship with another, could do so by first giving him or herself to a third party who would then mediate not only the offer and acceptance, but the gift and reception as well. Adopting the nounal formulation and conception ("mediation"), however, leads to more fertile ground. Paraphrasing Cardinal Dulles somewhat, enough to bring important elements of his thought together, we may assert an understanding that revelation is symbolic mediation *specifically because* the symbol, when it has as its object the divine mystery (as it does in the case of sacrament) functions as a revelatory mediation: a mediation that is revelatory; a mediation that is, one may say, revelation.

Mediation is, perhaps, an unfortunate term to use to indicate the function that the symbol provides vis-à-vis revelation. The weight of its common usage makes it difficult to hold Dulles' more technical sense consistently in mind. It is helpful in this regard to consider the symbol as a portal or gateway through which the infinite, uncreated and personal God is offered in such a way that it becomes accessible to the finite intellect and senses of created persons, and through which human persons encounter the divine mystery in such a way that a response and a reception is possible; a space in which the uncreated and the created can meet in mutual comprehension. Is it any wonder that when God deigned to covenant himself to the human community, the covenant – that is to say

the persons, divine and human – were given and received via the mediation of symbol. Given this image, it is possible to read Dulles’ “mediation” as something more akin to “translation” or “transformation,” a kenosis that remains nonetheless inexhaustible.

1. Symbolic Nature of the Ecclesial Sacrament

It is not necessary to present here the rationale for applying the term and the concept of “sacrament” to the church, for as chapter two made clear this understanding has been well established in the theological tradition. While sacrament cannot begin to *exhaust* the reality of the church, it does capture with particular aptness the essence of the myriad elements of ecclesial reality, such as worship, teaching, proclamation, and mission. As sacrament however, the church is a symbolic reality, therefore with sacramental ecclesiology as a point of departure, we turn now to examine in more detail the symbolic nature of the ecclesial sacrament.⁵⁵¹

It must first be noted candidly that while the church enjoys the life and power of the Holy Spirit ever present within it, its membership is nevertheless comprised of sinful human persons. As such the church, in its historical existence, can never be a perfect symbol; there will always be failures – great or small – of its call to be a light to the nations, a contrast society, the transformation of the world.⁵⁵² For this reason, until the parousia, the church remains at once sign and countersign, revealer and concealer, of the grace of God. As Dulles puts it, the church has both “sym-bolic” and “dia-bolic” aspects.⁵⁵³ But recognition of the church’s corporate concupiscence toward countersign

⁵⁵¹ For a discussion of the symbolic order as proper to the Church and a detailed treatment of the symbolic nature of the Church *in toto* see Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, chapter 5, particularly the section titled “The Symbolic Mediation of the Church” beginning on p. 171.

⁵⁵² Cf. Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 74.

⁵⁵³ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 219.

does not negate the sign; recognition of an inevitable expression of the diabolic does not extinguish the symbolic, any more than darkness can overcome the light.⁵⁵⁴ Just as with the patriarchs, Abraham, Moses and David, the prophets, Elijah, Isaiah and Jeremiah, and the Apostles – for whom their very weakness and frailties were the occasion for the strength and power of the Spirit to become operative and effective – so also with the church. The redeeming grace of God shines forth and the economy of salvation is realized not only in spite of human weakness and failure, but *a fortiori*, because of it.

Further, there is a fundamentally important missional necessity to the symbolic reality of the church. If the church is to function as a light to the nations, if it is to point members and non-members alike to the grace of God, present and active in the world, then it must be, in some sense, a *pointer* – a symbol. This presupposes but goes beyond Bellarmine's insight, important and valuable if at times over-emphasized, that the church must have a visible, tangible, physical aspect which the seeker can recognize, approach and enter, participate in, and follow to eternal life. For all its physicality however, the symbol which is the church is not always obvious. In fact it is only apparent from a position of faith. According to Chauvet, the recognition of the church as a symbolic reality only comes about through conversion. This conversion is required not only because of the necessity of seeing with the eyes of faith, but also because of the tendency to either over-emphasize the symbol and, forgetting that a symbol always points to a reality other than itself, blur the distinction between church and Christ, or, under-

⁵⁵⁴ Cf. John 1:5.

emphasize the symbol and reject the connection between the visible, organizational aspect of the church and the presence of grace in the world.⁵⁵⁵

Thirdly, as mentioned above, one of the unique qualities of symbol is its ability to reconcile seemingly contradictory elements (recall that symbol in its etymological origins meant, literally, to bring together). This the symbol can accomplish in a number of ways, for example: by creating a space in which the cognitive and imaginative mental faculties can work together to hold disparate notions in fruitful tension; by unifying within itself the competing or complementary concepts, elements or meanings; or by providing the locus of encounter between created and transcendent reality, thereby facilitating the always partial but inexhaustible communication of infinite mystery to the finite intellect. The symbolism of the church, therefore, enables it to become for the believer an encounter with the living God.

Finally the symbolism of the church is of that class of symbols which Dulles has designated *presentative* (as opposed to *representative*),⁵⁵⁶ i.e., symbols “in which the God who is symbolized is present and operative, somewhat as a human person is present in the body and its gestures.”⁵⁵⁷ This authentic symbol is most starkly contrasted with a sign or indicator that exhibits a level of arbitrariness to it, whereas a presentative symbol has no such arbitrariness – it arises from and expresses the reality symbolized. The quintessential example of a presentative symbol, for Dulles, is the humanity of Jesus, in which God who is symbolized is “present and operative.” When God speaks and the

⁵⁵⁵ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 186.

⁵⁵⁶ See “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 68, where Dulles explains “My term ‘presentative symbol’ corresponds approximately to what Karl Rahner has called ‘symbolic reality’ (*Realsymbol*) as distinct from ‘symbolic representation’ (*Vertretungssymbol*).

⁵⁵⁷ Dulles, “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 68.

Word is expressed in human form, this expression becomes inextricably and essentially manifested in the new, symbolic, reality of the Incarnation.

In a similar way the church, as a symbolic expression of Christ, belongs to the category of presentative symbol. The church is a presentative symbol of the person of Jesus Christ because Christ is “present and operative” in the community of believers, the “body of Christ,” animated by his Spirit. Though certainly the person of Christ is not present in the church in the same full and perfect sense in which it can be said that God is present in the person of Jesus (as hypostatic union), nonetheless, the ecclesial symbol is more than an arbitrary indicator or “representative symbol,” for it arises from and expresses, albeit imperfectly, the reality symbolized (Christ). In this sense it can be said, as Dulles at times suggests, that the church is the on-going symbolic presence of the Incarnation in history.⁵⁵⁸ As Christ “is the fundamental sacrament, for his visible human existence embodies, symbolically manifests, and communicates God’s powerful redemptive love,” so also “The Church, analogously, is a sacrament or symbolic reality which prolongs in time and space the event of God’s merciful approach in Jesus.”⁵⁵⁹

⁵⁵⁸ Dulles suggests this idea in a number of places, for example, “God’s loving self-insertion into the created order is perpetuated in the church,” “From Symbol to System,” 49; “Recognizing ecclesiastical office as a symbolic prolongation of Christ’s own presence in his capacity as teacher and lord . . .,” *Models of Revelation*, 225; or, in a less direct manner, “In order to be a sacrament, the Church must be an efficacious sign -- one in which the reality signified is manifestly present and operative. The Church, in other words, must be a lasting incarnation in the world of God’s redemptive love for all humankind as originally signified and concretized in Jesus Christ,” *A Church to Believe In*, 94. These assertions are balanced, however, by a clear awareness of the modality of the church as a symbolic presence of Christ, in statements such as “In spite of the assistance of the Holy Spirit, the Church, as a human community, is not, in the strict sense, a continued Incarnation of the Word, nor is it, properly speaking, an Incarnation of the Holy Spirit,” *The Catholicity of the Church*, 103.

⁵⁵⁹ Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, 30. Cf. K. Rahner, “The Church and the Sacraments,” in *Studies in Modern Theology* (London: Burns & Oates, 1963), 191-299 at 216: “...in the Church God’s grace is given expression and embodiment and symbolized, and by being so embodied, is present;” S. Wood, “Issues and Perspectives in Roman Catholic Ecclesiology Today,” in *The Ecumenical Future: Background Papers for In One Body Through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 126-137 at 131: “The Church as the body of Christ is the sacramental presence of Christ in the world in an analogous way in which Christ is the sacrament of

a. Ecclesial Characteristics of Symbolic Communication

In *Models of Revelation*, among Dulles' most mature writings on the subject and by his own estimation among his best work,⁵⁶⁰ Dulles carefully examines a number of properties characteristic of the communication of knowledge via symbol and proceeds rather famously to propose an argument for the symbolic nature of revelation by drawing out the striking similarities between the characteristics of symbolic communication and the communication of divine revelation. It is from this analysis, largely, that Dulles refines his argument that revelation is always and necessarily mediated, by the additional assertion that such revelatory mediation is always accomplished by symbol. Here I would like to press this assertion, and propose that the characteristics of the symbolic communication of knowledge also describe the life, worship, and activity of the church vis-à-vis divine self-disclosure.

Given the foregoing argument this should come as no great surprise. If it is true that revelation and the church have in common a sacramental nature, and sacramental efficacy is intimately bound up with symbol, it would seem the characteristics of symbolic communication (of knowledge, of grace, or most properly, of the divine mystery) and the characteristics of both divine revelation and the church not only might, but really must, overlap.

the Father. Christ is the image of and self-expression of the Father;" A. Dulles, "Imaging the Church for the 1980's," *Thought* 56, no. 221 (June 1981): 121-138 at 121: "The essential reality of the Church is indeed a matter of revealed truth, for only through faith in God's word do we understand the Church as expression and mediator of God's gift in Jesus Christ," *Models of Revelation*, 227: "the sacramental vision of the Church has immense importance for the theology of revelation. Looking upon the Church as the symbolic presence of Christ, who is himself the symbolic presence of the Word in human flesh, this vision preserves the realism of revelation;" Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 149: "The sacrament of the Church is constituted by the symbolic expression, in tangible form, of the salvific presence of Jesus Christ. This symbolization takes place through a multitude of actions, such as confessions of faith, the reading of Scripture, the celebration of the sacraments, and caritative service in the name of Christ."

⁵⁶⁰ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, vii.

1) Instrument of Participatory Knowledge

Not only first, but clearly foremost, in Dulles' appropriation of symbol for theology is the absolute requirement of active participation in the community within which the symbol functions as symbol, and in the world or realm created by the symbol. Dulles appeals to such a symbolic realm often in his writings, and among the many ways it is used two characteristics appear most consistently: participation and multivalence. In fact it is these two characteristics in particular that distinguish symbol from other, more arbitrary, signs or signals. Dulles contrasts the participatory knowledge given by the symbol with speculative knowledge derived by other means. Symbols communicate knowledge only if and insofar as the recipient is involved. The symbol, according to Dulles, "speaks to us only insofar as it lures us to situate ourselves mentally within the universe of meaning and value which it opens up to us."⁵⁶¹ Dulles claims that revelatory knowledge is similarly participatory, for it gives "participatory awareness." Especially apropos here is the rationale given for making this claim. Revelatory knowledge gives participatory awareness because "to accept the Christian revelation is to involve oneself in a community of faith and thus share in the way of life marked out by Jesus."⁵⁶² The participation demanded by revelatory knowledge is specifically participation in the church – the community of faith. In fact, "Christ and the Church, by their very existence, invite us to share in the life that is theirs. This invitation they make *through the symbolic modality of their being in the world.*"⁵⁶³ Through the liturgy – word and sacrament – in

⁵⁶¹ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 136.

⁵⁶² *Ibid.*, 138.

⁵⁶³ Dulles, "The Symbolic Structure of Revelation," 61 (emphasis added).

its teaching and mission, the church communicates knowledge of God and divine life itself, but only if and insofar as there is participation in the ecclesial community.

2) **Community of Personal Transformation**

A second important characteristic of symbolic knowledge in general is that it transforms the knower in a number of possible ways. The symbol can effect a rather vague, but nonetheless powerful, emotional effect often experienced as “moving” by the knower. It can arouse, strengthen or renew emotions and feelings, and as a direct result can have a profoundly transforming effect on our values and ideals.⁵⁶⁴ It can be healing, as evidenced by the use of symbols in the practice of psychotherapy; it can transform not only our emotions and values, but what we are most acutely aware of, and therefore in some sense transform our consciousness itself.⁵⁶⁵ Revelation, Dulles points out, is also and similarly transformative, and, like symbolic communication, the transformative character of revelation is closely linked to its participatory character. In both cases, a new world of meaning and value is created, a world we are called to enter and in which we must participate in order to glean the knowledge offered – but entering into this world means accepting altered perspectives, shifted horizons of meaning, new or reprioritized values, etc. In the case of revelatory knowledge, the world within which this knowledge is available is a spiritual world in which our horizon approaches the infinite, our viewpoint is aligned with the foot of the cross, and our perspective becomes that of a child of God. Applying this characteristic of transformation to the life and reality of the church is perhaps such an obvious move that it could be easily overlooked. The *raison*

⁵⁶⁴ For a detailed study of the connection between emotions and moral values or commitments to the right, based primarily on the research of the social sciences, see Timothy E. O’Connell, *Making Disciples: A Handbook of Christian Moral Formation* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1998), esp. 57-74.

⁵⁶⁵ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 136-7.

d'être of the church is transformation of the individual and of the world: conversion followed by rebirth and new life. It is the making new, by the power of the Spirit, all creation and the establishment of a viewpoint transformed by participation in the ecclesial community continuously renewed in sacramental unity. One cannot participate in the life of the church and not be transformed in many, essential, and profound ways.

3) **Mother of Faith and Missionary Zeal**

It is a short step from the symbol's transforming effect to its influence on the knower's commitments and behavior. Behavior is the result of choice, and the consistency of choices derives from commitment to a system of values that provides the resolve necessary to carry through with difficult decisions. Commitment to certain values or value systems, in turn, is a function of one's affective attachment to the relationships which depend upon fidelity to those values. Dulles draws out the distinction in terms of mere theoretical assent, which could be given to strictly propositional truth versus altered conduct which expresses the acceptance of symbolic truth. Timothy O'Connell describes the same dichotomy as speculative vs. evaluative knowledge. Speculative knowledge is what Dulles has called "theoretical assent," that is, incidental knowledge that lacks personal significance, that does not require any real commitment. Evaluative knowledge on the other hand is bound up with an appreciation for the value or the relationships associated with the knowledge; it is knowledge that is personally significant, and therefore cannot be held without, as Dulles says, an expression in conduct.⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶⁶ O'Connell, *Making Disciples*, 29-33.

This important characteristic of symbolic knowledge is, of course, an integral part of the experience of revelation as well. Something is recognized as a revelation, often, because it moves us on such a deep, emotional and spiritual level, that it creates a commitment to particular values or relationships, which has the power to subsequently alter our behavior. Consider again the story presented in chapter one, of Dulles' conversion experience brought about by the symbolic instrumentality of a young tree beginning to bud: "On its frail, supple branches were young buds attending eagerly the spring which was at hand. While my eye rested on them the thought came to me suddenly, *with all the strength and novelty of a revelation*, that these little buds in their innocence and meekness followed a rule, a law of which I as yet knew nothing."⁵⁶⁷ This revelation, and the contemplation that followed, pushed the young Dulles to take the final step in his initial conversion, and commit to a worldview filled with teleological purpose. The act of acceptance of such revelatory truth, communicated symbolically, is an act of faith, expressed in conduct.⁵⁶⁸ In a similar way the church, because of its transformative character, has an impact on the commitments and behaviors of those who participate in its life and mission. In the church's worship, liturgy, proclamation, teachings and outreach, knowledge of God and the divine economy of salvation becomes personally significant; the knower's relationship with Christ and through Christ with the community of faith becomes highly valued; and acceptance of this truth in faith is expressed through new modes of conduct.

⁵⁶⁷ Dulles, *A Testimonial to Grace*, 35 (emphasis added).

⁵⁶⁸ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 138.

4) Locus of Symbolic Encounter with Divine Mystery

Finally, Dulles contends that there are certain “realms of awareness” or levels of reality, which, though still quite real, are not accessible to human intellect by ordinary means.⁵⁶⁹ The symbol is uniquely suited to provide awareness of and access to these transcendent levels, or realms, of reality because of its evocative and multivalent nature. The symbol “works mysteriously on the human consciousness so as to suggest more than it can clearly describe or define.”⁵⁷⁰ The word “suggest” in the previous sentence is an important qualifier for the symbolic modality: the symbol does not so much present propositional knowledge for intellectual scrutiny as evoke understanding and participation by drawing the knower out of himself or herself (so Polanyi) and into its own world. For this reason the symbol is able to overcome what for other instruments are insurmountable obstacles: an over-abundance of meaning, and apparent logical contradictions. The symbol draws forth from the knower elements already present and brings those elements to conscious awareness and use. Because it is not confined to a one-to-one correspondence of meaning, the symbol can “generate an indefinite series of particular insights.”⁵⁷¹ The symbol’s multivalence also creates space for two or more conflicting insights to be held in tension, in some cases perhaps even unified within the symbol itself.

Revelation, says Dulles, operates in just this way. For one thing, only those insights and knowledge that could not be obtained through unaided reason may be properly considered revelation. Further, the insights given through revelation frequently

⁵⁶⁹ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 137.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

appear to contradict themselves: God is merciful and just; Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man; the human person is subject to both grace and free will; and on and on.

Because revelation is the communication of transcendent mystery, it will always be partial – a simultaneous concealing and revealing; Revelation itself is a mystery of faith.

Clearly the church, as sacrament, also functions not only to make otherwise inaccessible levels of reality accessible, but in fact to make them present and operative, i.e., efficacious, in the midst of the community of faith and even the larger human community. Perhaps most obviously in the liturgy, the worshipping community is united with the heavenly liturgy, and a new realm of reality is rendered accessible and present. The image of Christ as the grapevine from John 15, developed at some length by John Paul II in *Christifideles Laici* 55, suggests a further application of this fourth characteristic to the church. According to this image, Christ is the vine through which divine life and the power of the Spirit flows, members of the body of Christ are the branches who, drawing upon this power, bear fruit for the benefit of the whole, the Kingdom of God. The individual members exist therefore in unity with each other by virtue of their unity with Christ. The church in its very construction as a mystery of unity, exhibits a realm of spiritual truth beyond the reach of observation or reason. Finally the reality of the Eucharist, the “source and summit of the Christian life,”⁵⁷² stands as evidence of a level of reality that is neither wholly spiritual nor merely physical, but sacramental.

⁵⁷² *Lumen Gentium* 11.

b. Symbolic Nature of Christ and of the Church

The symbolic nature of the sacrament of the church is, clearly, an important element in Dulles' overall theological system; but particularly as it relates to his revelation theology. In *Models of Revelation*, Dulles makes this explicit:

The sacramental vision of the Church has immense importance for the theology of revelation. Looking upon the Church as the symbolic presence of Christ who is himself the symbolic presence of the Word in human flesh, this vision preserves the realism of revelation.⁵⁷³

There can be little doubt that a vision of the church as sacramental – in whatever capacity – gives rise to the notion that there is within the church a very real and very powerful “symbolic presence” of the divine. But this vision also brings with it the potential for divinizing the church itself that must be carefully avoided. To affirm, as Dulles does, “the church as the symbolic presence of Christ who is himself the symbolic presence of the Word in human flesh” would seem to leave open the possibility for an understanding of the church in its symbolic capacity as itself a presence of the divine Logos.

It has been stressed earlier in this study that the relationship of the church to Christ is analogical, and therefore the church, unlike its divine founder, is not divine. However, within the realm of symbolic presentation the situation becomes murkier: how are we to understand the church as simultaneously the symbolic presence of a symbolic presence of God, and yet not itself divine? Many theologians in the decades framing Vatican II have written of the sacramentality of the church, pointing out that a sacrament of whatever sort – Christ, church or liturgical sign – effects a real presence of the reality signified. “If the Church is a sacrament of Christ,” Dulles writes, “that is because Christ

⁵⁷³ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 227.

is really present in it.”⁵⁷⁴ Paradoxically, such a statement by itself could either add to or ease the concern that the church’s sacramentality amounts to its divinization. While the sacrament of the church effects a real presence of Christ who is within it, how could the church be both the reality of Christ and a sacramental presence of that reality? Though, as Dulles notes, Schillebeeckx has written of the church as “the sign filled with the reality it signifies,” it is still, in the final analysis, a sign (albeit a sacramental sign) and not the reality itself.⁵⁷⁵

Dulles is committed to the teaching of the sacramentality of the church, including all of the implications of the powerful symbolic modality that accompany it, and does not shy away from the conclusions that such a view demands. As a sacramental symbol (a *Realsymbol*), the church is the expression of a transcendent reality, Christ, in sensible reality. For Rahner, from whom Dulles appropriates the concept of *Realsymbol*, this is particularly powerful: not only does the *Realsymbol* function as an expression of the transcendent reality, but in fact that transcendent reality realizes itself through self-expression.⁵⁷⁶ Rahner puts forth as the first principle of an ontology of symbol that “all beings are by their nature symbolic, because they necessarily ‘express’ themselves in order to attain their own nature.”⁵⁷⁷ The symbol, according to Rahner, is a reality which renders another reality present. It is a representation of a reality “which allows the other ‘to be there.’”⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid., 218.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid. Cf. Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God*, 205.

⁵⁷⁶ As Rahner puts it, “a being ‘comes to itself’ in its expression, in the derivative agreement of the differentiated which is preserved as the perfection of the unity.” “The Theology of the Symbol,” 229.

⁵⁷⁷ Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 224.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid., 225.

While Dulles draws heavily from Rahner, and certainly has a deep appreciation for Rahner's theology of symbol, in his own writings he is most apt to employ a concept of symbol distinct to his own theology. Rather than employing *Realsymbol* which points explicitly to Rahner's concept, Dulles writes that "Just as Christ is a real symbol of the godhead, so, analogously, the Church is a real symbol of Christ."⁵⁷⁹ The force of the claim is to distinguish the symbolic reality of both Christ and the church from lesser realities such as a sign, or indicator. Quoting from Latourelle, Dulles clarifies that "Christ appears as a *theophany*" and "the Church appears as a *Christophany*." But, certainly,

The parallelism is only an analogy. Christ is a divine person, but the Church is not a divine person. It is a community of human persons kept in union with Christ by the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus. To the extent that it lives up to the law of its own being, the Church is a sign and reflection of Christ, who directs it and dwells in it by his Spirit.⁵⁸⁰

Still, the church does more than point us to Christ. It is related to the symbol of Christ analogously, but it is still a potent symbol, a sacramental reality. "The Church is," according to Dulles, "a symbol of Christ insofar as by its configuration it points to him and actualizes what God tells us through his Son."⁵⁸¹ It is significant to note Dulles specifies that the ecclesial symbol, or sacrament, actualizes "what God tells us through his Son," and not that it actualizes the Son Himself. Furthermore, it is significant that what is in fact actualized by the church according to this claim is nothing less than

⁵⁷⁹ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 218.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*

revelation: what is actualized is “what God tells us” through the person whom Vatican II described as “the mediator and fullness of all revelation,” Christ.⁵⁸²

2. Mediatory Modality of the Ecclesial Sacrament

Given the above it is evident that if the church is to exercise a mediatory function at all, that function must necessarily be symbolic mediation. Having already examined in detail the nature of symbol and the modality of symbolic communication, we turn now to examine what, specifically, is accomplished by virtue of the church’s symbolic and sacramental nature, i.e., the function of the church’s mediation.

The etymological root of the word “mediate” is the Latin *mediare*, from *medius* (middle), meaning to be in the middle, to halve or divide in two pieces (cut in the middle), or to intercede (stand in the middle, come between). This is certainly the most common sense in which the English word and its associated forms (mediation, mediator) are used. A mediator is one who reconciles dissenting parties, who divides and portions out justly, who negotiates an equitable settlement, or who intercedes with one party on behalf of another. This last sense came into the service of theology in the writings of St. Augustine as early as the 5th century, following the dominant New Testament usage, to indicate the intercession accomplished by Christ on behalf of humanity.⁵⁸³ In later, though still very early, theological usage it began to refer specifically to the atonement.

Such usage clearly reflects the sense of the most familiar New Testament passage (1 Tim 2:5), where mediator is applied to Jesus with the sense of one who intercedes or stands between: “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men,

⁵⁸² *Dei Verbum* 2.

⁵⁸³ Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, Fifth Edition, s.v. “mediation.”

the man Christ Jesus.” Gal 3:19-20 uses the term in a closely related way to designate one who exercises an intermediary function, something of a go-between, or courier. In fact, though the same Greek term (μεσιτης) is used in all three instances, the RSV from which the Scripture quotations in this work are drawn, translates the term in this passage as “intermediary” rather than “mediator.” It reads, “Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained by angels through an intermediary.” There is a third passage however, which is a significant deviation from the two just mentioned, and which provides some warrant for the term as it has been used by Dulles and other theologians to describe the function of symbol vis-à-vis revelation. In Hebrews 8:6, Paul uses the term to describe the function of Jesus Christ in relation to the new covenant:⁵⁸⁴ “But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry which is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.”⁵⁸⁵ This sense, of mediating a covenant, an exchange of persons, is clearly a departure from that of intercessor or intermediary. Here now we have left behind the etymological root of “being in the middle,” in favor of communication, transmission, or bestowal (gift).

The Oxford English Dictionary describes this second meaning of mediator or mediation in various ways: as an agent or instrument of communication, transmission, or transference (gift); the medium through which the result is achieved or the communication accomplished; or the transitional space between two things. Under this second sense then, mediation as the communication or transmission of the divine self

⁵⁸⁴ There is a close conceptual and etymological connection between “covenant” and “symbol” in ancient societies. Both of these terms indicated an exchange of persons in the form of personal promises, oaths, or pledges. The symbol was cleaved in two as part of the covenant exchange, and later brought forward as evidence of claim to the covenant promises.

⁵⁸⁵ Cf. Heb 9:15 and 12:23-24 where the phrase is repeated with minor variances.

appears not only entirely suited to describe the act of revelation, but very nearly a synonym. In fact, such a claim is implicitly endorsed by Dulles and echoed by others as well.⁵⁸⁶ Within the context of the sacramental nature of religious symbols, the *ex opere operato* modality of Christian sacraments, and the transactional nature of revelation, it is not too much to say that the mediation is the revelation.⁵⁸⁷

The mediatory function of the symbol is therefore first of all absolutely necessary for the communication of uncreated reality to created reality to take place. The quality of the divine nature as “wholly other” precludes human persons from entering into immediate communication with the divine mystery. In the absence of some such mediation (a kenosis, translation, filtration, etc.) that which is infinite is, by nature, inaccessible to the created, finite mind. In one passage Latourelle suggests that there are certain cases in which “God can act directly in the soul” to effect an interior communication of divine testimony, and that such an act is described in Scripture as, among other things, revelation.⁵⁸⁸ Latourelle makes a compelling case, however even this “direct testimony” must be mediated through the symbols of language, concepts and ideas before it can achieve a sufficient level of cognitive recognition to function as a real

⁵⁸⁶ See, for example, H. Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 5-9; L-M Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan, S.J. and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 17, 182-183.

⁵⁸⁷ See the discussion of mediation as revelation under the heading of “Revelatory Modality of the Church, the Fundamental Sacrament” starting on page 230, above. I have not encountered this claim made explicitly in the theological literature I have surveyed, but implications are not uncommon. For example, Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 107; Dulles, “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 69, “there is no revelation apart from the created signs by which it is mediated,” implying that symbolic mediation gives existence to revelation. A similar claim is made by Dulles in various contexts. See also Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, 8-9; Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 230, *et passim*. For a related notion cf. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 17, who claims that “The [sacramental] ‘sign’ (*signum*), as it is presented by the celebrating Church, is the *very mediation* of the gift of grace.”

⁵⁸⁸ Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 324. Cf. Matt 11:25 and 16:17.

communication of knowledge or awareness. Paul Avis aptly summarizes the inescapable necessity of symbol in terms of access: “The crucial point about symbolism is that there is no access to [the] transcendent realm apart from its symbols. Symbolism (like metaphor) is not an adornment of truth already gained on other grounds: it is itself the path to truth.”⁵⁸⁹ The symbol contains within itself the truth of revelation and the power to effect conscious awareness of this truth in the knower. The process by which this function is accomplished is what is here being referred to as “symbolic mediation.”

Given the absolute necessity of symbol for access to the transcendent, particularly divine, realm, a first great task of symbolic mediation of revelation is to establish or create access to the transformative gift which exceeds the capacities or mode of knowing in the human subject. According to Aquinas’ well-known dictum “knowledge is regulated according as the thing known is in the knower. But the thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower.”⁵⁹⁰ The mediation accomplished by the symbol is therefore first of all a type of translation of the inaccessible and transcendent into the mode of human knowing: sensory, experiential, rational, cognitive, imaginative, affective, relational – but in every case, essentially dependent upon created reality as the medium of the message.

Secondly, the function of mediation to create access to the transcendent realm, to create and deepen the relationship between persons of qualitatively, otherwise unbridgeably different natures, and to establish a mode of knowing that otherwise exceeds human capacities, is a function of *communication*. It is a communication of nature, of personal reality and of meaning. The gift offered by God is nothing less than

⁵⁸⁹ Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination*, 107.

⁵⁹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Prima Pars, q. 12, a. 4.

the gift of God's own nature and self in personal relationship with creation. Avis explains: "It belongs to symbols to mediate a reality or meaning that transcends the symbol itself. . . . [which] always carries a value greater than the individual."⁵⁹¹ Symbolic mediation creates access to a realm of reality that, in the absence of the symbolic communication, utterly transcends the capacities of human nature, and provides the means and the space within which real communication between these disparate realms may be accomplished. Dulles, also, at times uses "mediating" as synonymous with "communicating." For example, "The abundance of symbolism in the Bible is not a matter of whim or accident. The language of everyday prose would be incapable of mediating the loving approach of the all-holy God with comparable warmth and efficacy."⁵⁹² In such passages mediation is presented as something which effects a kind of kenosis of knowledge that exceeds the mode of the human knower into a form that can be received.⁵⁹³

What then is mediated? According to Vorgrimler symbolic mediation creates access to, and communication of, God's revelation (the self-gift of God), the knowledge of God, God's communication of the divine will, and God's presence. Although Vorgrimler, like Latourelle, asserts the interiority of God's presence, all of these things "are given to us humans only through mediation, and are not immediate to us."⁵⁹⁴ He goes on, importantly, to describe the effects of the mediation: God approaches his creation, in particular human persons, "in love, to change them, to impel them to further action, to

⁵⁹¹ Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination*, 107.

⁵⁹² Dulles, "Symbol, Myth and the Biblical Revelation," 6.

⁵⁹³ Cf. Dulles, "The Symbolic Structure of Revelation," 56, where symbolic mediation is presented as "a *vehicle* for the divine self-communication."

⁵⁹⁴ Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, 8.

move them to advance together with creation on the way home to God.”⁵⁹⁵ In doing so, however, the unique nature of human persons is maintained such that after the changes effected by the mediation of revelation the human person remains unaltered in essence; it is just that now the divine mystery is present to and active in the human person.

A third function of the symbolic mediation of the church is to express the symbolized reality in and through the symbol. This formulation of course immediately brings to mind Karl Rahner’s essay “The Theology of the Symbol,” as mentioned above, in which he describes in some detail the mediation of symbols as the expression of transcendent realities, and in fact, of all being. According to Rahner, being “expresses itself and possesses itself by doing so. It gives itself away from itself into the ‘other’, and there finds itself in knowledge and love.”⁵⁹⁶ As symbol, the church expresses the being of Christ, and in this expression the symbolized (Christ) achieves Himself such that the expression becomes essential to the reality of the symbolized. Thus Dulles can claim that such an expression is bound up with the essential reality of the church, “for only through faith in God’s word do we understand the Church as expression and mediator of God’s gift in Jesus Christ.”⁵⁹⁷ Vorgrimler also uses this language of expression to describe the symbolic mediation of revelation. All of human reality is symbolic, according to Vorgrimler, just as Dulles consistently asserts. This includes, specifically, the relationship which God, in mercy and love, deigned to establish with human persons: “If God desires to be present to human beings,” he argues, “God’s presence must create a

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid., 8-9.

⁵⁹⁶ Karl Rahner, S. J., “The Theology of the Symbol,” 230.

⁵⁹⁷ Dulles, “Imaging the Church for the 1980’s,” 121.

symbolic expression for itself in order that it can be ‘real’ for human beings.”⁵⁹⁸ Thus the mediatory function of the church includes, fundamentally, the expression of divine mystery, through symbol, in created reality.

A final function of the church’s symbolic mediation, is to “initiate sinners into a saving relationship with God.”⁵⁹⁹ This mediation by the symbol of the church enables us to “conceptually articulate” our “real, existential relationship” with God. If, then, the church is in the business of facilitating an encounter – a relationship or covenant – with the living God, such business is *de facto* a symbolic mediation. An encounter with God is always revelatory to a certain degree, even if all that is revealed is that the God of Christian faith is a God who desires and solicits encounter with his creation, emptying himself in love in order to achieve it. And, as Dulles insists, revelation is never “an unmediated encounter with God. It is always mediated through an experience in the world”⁶⁰⁰

3. Revelation Ecclesiology

In the introduction to this study I suggested that the “revelation ecclesiology” for which I am arguing could be described or defined, in a preliminary way, as “an ecclesiology that takes full and honest account of the church’s revelatory character.” The current chapter has sought to construct this revelatory ecclesiology by describing in detail the symbolic potency and modality of the ecclesial sacrament, within the context of demonstrating that sacraments, by nature, exhibit a certain revelatory character. The precise quality of that character varies somewhat however, among the various

⁵⁹⁸ Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, 10.

⁵⁹⁹ Dulles, “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 64.

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

sacramental realities. Within Dulles' sign-symbol-sacrament schema already considered, he maintains a further division within the category of symbol. Not every symbol is revelatory, and whether or not a certain element of reality is a "revelatory symbol" is a function not of its symbolic potency nor of its capacity to mediate or effect communication – but rather a function of the nature of the reality that is being symbolized.

As previously noted, Dulles defines revelatory symbols as "those which express and mediate God's self-communication."⁶⁰¹ All symbols, by nature, are expressions of a transcendent reality, inaccessible to the cognitive faculties alone; all symbols likewise mediate, or communicate meaning, of that transcendent reality to one who enters into the world of meaning created by the symbol. In order to be a *revelatory* symbol, however, the symbol must be an expression of a divine reality, and mediate the communication of that divine reality to human consciousness. This chapter has thus far considered the revelatory character of two sacramental realities, the seven individual sacraments, and the primordial sacrament of Jesus Christ. It was argued above that the revelatory nature of these two sacramental realities is qualitatively different, as in the one case the sacramental symbol is an expression of divinity itself; in the other, the sacramental symbol is an expression of divine grace – a "visible form of invisible grace."

The seven liturgical signs are in an important sense several steps removed from what may be considered revelation in its truest form, effected by the sacrament of Christ. As expressions of the faith of the church and instruments of the grace offered in and through the church, they represent the actions of Christ and the church, but are neither

⁶⁰¹ Ibid., 56.

expressions of the being of Christ, nor of the ecclesial reality. Though certainly potent, efficacious, and exhibitiv of a number of profound affinities with revelation (as has been shown above), the sacraments cannot be said to be “revelatory” in the same, strict, sense as is appropriately applied to Christ, fundamentally, and the church, derivatively. The individual sacraments exhibit a certain revelatory character in so far as they are symbols through which it is Christ himself who acts to baptize, forgive, effect communion in the offer of his body and blood, and so on.

The ecclesial sacrament, therefore, while only analogous to the sacrament of Christ and not united, hypostatically, to its referent as is the sacramental symbol of Christ (his humanity), nonetheless shares an important characteristic with the sacrament of Christ that the seven individual sacraments do not. Both the sacrament of Christ, as revelatory symbol of the Father, and the ecclesial sacrament, as revelatory symbol of the Incarnate Son, are, each in their own manner, sacramental expressions of God. Each points to, and effects a presence of, a divine person. The ecclesial sacrament is a sacramental expression (sign and instrument) of Christ, who is Himself very God – consubstantial with the Father. An expression of Christ in tangible sign is, still, an instance of the self-communication of God, particularly if and when that same sign contains within itself an acceptance of the communication, as is the case with the sign constituted by the ecclesial community. Christ therefore stands as both sign and signified: as sacrament of the Father he is the self-expression and self-communication of God (“He who has seen me has seen the Father” – Jn 14:9); and as the referent of his own divine self-expression (“He who hears you hears me” – Lk 10:16), he is signified in and through the church. The one key caveat, presented at various places above, must be

reiterated once more, here: the symbolic expression of God in the person of Christ is full, and perfect (though not yet complete); the symbolic expression of the divine Son in his church, in contrast, though real and revelatory in so far as it goes, is partial and imperfect and will remain so until the eschaton.

Concluding Remarks

After some decades of theological discussion and development of thought on the subject, Vatican II took a definitive step in clearly embracing a view of the church as sacrament, though as previously discussed, it did so initially in qualified terms, “*Ecclesia sit in Christo veluti sacramentum.*”⁶⁰² The council clarified however that the church understands herself to be a sacrament in her role as “sign and instrument.” The sign aspect of the church, as with any sacrament, goes well beyond the arbitrary indicators often associated with that term, and refers more properly to the actively evocative, efficacious and inexhaustible ‘symbol.’ Furthermore, the instrumentality of the church is the instrumentality of mediation via the unique modality of symbol and of the transcendent reality particular to the symbol.

But the communication realized through the mediation of a symbol, when the referent of that symbol is the divine mystery itself, is precisely what Dulles has consistently held to be – in fact defined as – divine revelation. Thus an examination of the characteristics of symbolic communication in themselves, and as Dulles has applied them to revelation, has shown that the sacrament of the church is not only a reality endowed with the mediatory potency of symbol, but in fact exhibits the very characteristics of symbolic mediation that characterize the event of revelation. A close

⁶⁰² *Lumen Gentium* 1.

look at the symbolic nature of the ecclesial sacrament has revealed that the referent of the sacrament of the church is indeed the divine mystery, as that mystery has come to expression through the Incarnation.⁶⁰³ As sacrament, the *sacramentum*, or symbol, of the church points us always to its divine founder; as symbol, the church creates a space within itself in which the created and uncreated exist in unity and covenant relationship. As symbol, the church calls to participation, commitment, conversion and transformed awareness, all who encounter and perceive it. As sacrament, the church effects and makes present the reality signified; as symbolic mediation, this instrumentality provides access to an otherwise utterly transcendent reality, accomplishes the communication – however partial – of the divine life and essence to human persons, facilitates the reception of this gift, and expresses the divine mystery in created reality.

Like its divine founder, who is, in His person, life and ministry, the symbolic mediation of what God has desired to make known concerning Himself, so also the church, in its sacramentality, is the symbolic mediation of the transcendent mystery of Jesus Christ, pointing to and actualizing what God has desired to tell us through his Son. It is a sacramental symbol which solicits participation, evokes meaning, transforms consciousness, and intensifies commitments concerning its transcendent referent. Viewed within the larger theological system constructed by Dulles, this symbolic mediation is the on-going and continual, if partial and imperfect, accomplishment of the event of revelation.

⁶⁰³ This of course is the consistent assertion of those who espouse the sacramentality of the Church, but see especially the assertion within the discussion of “the fundamental mediation of the Church” in Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 182-83: “the recognition of Jesus as Christ and Lord cannot take place, as we observed above, through a personal contact with him, but on the contrary requires acquiescence in the mediation of his symbolic body, the Church.”

CHAPTER V:
REVELATION ECCLESIOLOGY: THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Over the course of the preceding four chapters, this study has taken an in-depth look at the nature of Dulles' particular theologies of revelation and of the church, bringing those two signature positions into conversation. At the intersection of those two theologies stands the mysterious and powerful reality of symbol, and there the conversation begins. Symbol is a defining characteristic for both the theology of the church as a sacramental reality and the theology of revelation as an event of divine self-communication. The initial chapter of this study, therefore, set out to describe, as precisely and comprehensively as possible, the foundational category of symbol and the related theological concepts of revelation, church, and sacrament, as they operate in Dulles' theological system.

Chapter two took up the task of demonstrating and describing the crucial role of symbol in the development of Dulles' ecclesiology. His commitment to the symbolic character of all reality nurtured a theology of the church as sacramental in nature, for at the heart of the sacramental reality lies the unique efficacy of symbol. Thus the sacrament of the church draws power from the divine grace operative within it, but draws its efficacy from the particular efficacy of the symbol. Like all symbols, it evokes meaning, solicits participation, and transforms consciousness and understanding. Like all symbols, furthermore, the sacrament of the church renders transcendent reality accessible to human understanding and experience. As a particular case of symbol, however – a sacramental symbol – the church has an ontological connection to Christ, effecting a particular presence of its divine founder. As symbol, the church effects a divine presence that is symbolic, thus efficacious, evocative, and transformative, yet is also a reality

endowed with the capacity to combine within itself both a transcendent reality and its material expression. Emphasizing the sacramental nature of the church therefore, provided Dulles with a tool to overcome the unnecessary and destructive dichotomy between institutional and mystical extremes within the spectrum of ecclesial conceptions.

Chapter three has shown how Dulles understands the phenomenon of divine revelation to be an event of communication, a loving outreach of God to His creation, with a transactional nature requiring the participation of both parties. It is an event that must be initiated by God, for by nature the communiqué is inaccessible to the unaided human faculties of cognition, affection, even imagination. As such it is an event of communication that requires a mediation not in order to be initiated, but in order to be received, as all knowledge is, according to the mode of the knower. Furthermore, it has been shown that within Dulles' many writings on the subject, a strong case was made that among the myriad elements of reality comprising the human experience, the reality of symbol is particularly – and yes, even uniquely – capable of providing the mediation necessary to translate a self-disclosure of the divine mystery into a human mode of knowing. This is the case because, and only so far as, the recipient of revelation submits to the power of the symbol, allowing it to stir the imagination, allowing it to suggest an inexhaustible “brood” of meanings, far exceeding what ordinary language can explicitly denote, and allowing it to create a particular world of meaning within the history, culture and tradition of the community in which the symbol is presented.

Hence symbol stands at the very heart of the phenomenon of divine revelation, or at the very least, at the heart of the accomplishment of the revelatory transaction. It is possible, theoretically, for God to present a self-disclosure in the absence of symbolic

reality, but as Dulles has convincingly argued, it is not likewise possible for the human intellect to receive that disclosure as revelation without recourse to the symbol's unique mediatory modality and communicative power.

Chapter four, finally, has shown that the reality of sacrament, as that reality describes the community of faith, the church, is imbued with all of the mediatory and communicative potency of symbol *and* an ontological connection to Jesus Christ, that is not only unique among symbols, but unique even among sacramental forms. It is a sacramental-symbolic expression of Christ, analogous to, but distinct from, Christ as the sacramental-symbolic expression of the Father; yet the sacrament of the church, as a symbolic expression of Christ, is also qualitatively distinct from the seven individual sacraments expressing the faith and life of the church. Due to its symbolic efficacy, the sacrament of the church is capable of effectively mediating the self-communication of Christ to its faithful, but still human, sinful, and finite members, in both their communal and individual expressions. The sacrament of the church, it is argued, belongs to that category of symbol that Dulles has designated as "revelatory," expressing and mediating God's self-communication in Christ.

With these previous four chapters, the argument of this study is complete. The task remains, however, to consider the implications of the revelation ecclesiology just constructed, for the enterprise of ecclesiology and its related disciplines. This concluding chapter will therefore consider a number of implications, issues and questions that arise in connection with an understanding of the ecclesial sacrament as a revelatory symbol. I cannot, of course, be exhaustive in that regard in this space, but will seek to present here a representative sample of the possible implications of the argument. It is hoped that the

issues considered here will serve as a catalyst for further considerations and further fruitful conversation surrounding the revelatory character of the church.

A. Mission of the Church as Transformation of the World

The current study's aim is constructive rather than descriptive, hence the focus thus far has been rather exclusively on the church's nature, with relatively less attention to its mission. Yet, as an expanded understanding of nature calls out for a correspondingly expanded understanding of mission, it seems both appropriate and necessary to begin a consideration of the implications of the revelation ecclesiology constructed in the preceding chapters, with a closer look at how a view of the church as a revelatory symbol can support or challenge existing notions of the church's mission.

1. Universal Sacrament of Salvation

The New Testament is clear in its presentation of the mission given by Christ to his apostles as a mission to transform the world. Their missionary work is not to be restricted either geographically, to the region of Judea, nor evangelistically, to proclamation of the Word. On the contrary, the mission of the church is to be the instrument of spiritual transformation, and is to be universal. The Gospel of Matthew records how, having reached the end of his earthly mission, Jesus instructed his disciples to continue that mission on a universal scale with the exhortation, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations." He furthermore emphasized the transformational aspect of the mission, instructing the apostles to call all the nations to discipleship by "baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19-20, cf. Mk 16:15).

In a similar vein, the Acts of the Apostles records Jesus' final instructions to his disciples before he ascended: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:7-8). This geographically concentric schema emphasizes the intended scope of the church's mission as gradually, but certainly, universal.

One striking feature of this directive is the exclusively outward focus – to the world, rather than to the community of disciples itself. In his final words, Christ does not exhort the eleven to shore up the faith of the existing community of believers and tend to their spiritual growth; they are tasked instead with bringing all that has been given to the fledgling church – the grace of salvation and the revelation of Christ – to all the world. Of course such language does not overtly preclude an *ad intra* element of the ecclesial mission which is constantly working to nurture the life of faith within its members, but the force of the directive seems to be to instill an understanding that the gifts given to the church are in fact given *through* the church to, and for, the world.

This understanding is clearly evident in the vision of Vatican II as well. The council's decree on the church's missionary activity opens with, and takes its name (*Ad Gentes*) from this outward focus: "Divinely sent to the nations of the world to be unto them 'a universal sacrament of salvation,' the Church . . . strives ever to proclaim the Gospel to all men."⁶⁰⁴ The council fathers continue,

The mission of the Church, therefore, is fulfilled by that activity which makes her, obeying the command of Christ and influenced by the grace and love of the Holy Spirit, fully present to all men or nations, in order that, by the example of her life and by her preaching, by the sacraments

⁶⁰⁴ *Ad Gentes* 1.

and other means of grace, she may lead them to the faith, the freedom and the peace of Christ; that thus there may lie open before them a firm and free road to full participation in the mystery of Christ.⁶⁰⁵

The church works to fulfill its mission with a self-awareness of its sacramental character, that is, an awareness that it functions in the world as both sign and instrument of the unity of humanity with God. The signifying and effective functions are universal insofar as they are present and active in the world for the benefit of all who would approach with a heart open to receiving the divine grace and revelatory meaning offered there. The function of the church's sacramental symbol and instrumentality differ, however, according to the circumstances of the beholder; in particular, the extent of the beholder's communion with and participation in the community of faith.

In the passage from *Ad Gentes* quoted above, the council fathers specify that to fulfill its mission, the church must be "fully present to all men or nations" in order to bring them "to full participation in the mystery of Christ." The ability of the church to be fully present, however, is conditioned upon the openness of the hearer to encounter the church as an efficacious, and revelatory, symbol and enter into the world of meaning created by that symbol, thereby participating in the accomplishment of the revelatory event. For one outside of ecclesial communion, the visible elements of the church do not attain the dignity of symbol. The structures, organization, hierarchy and worshipping community will always, by virtue of their visibility, maintain the character of sign, pointing to the reality of Christian faith and grace active and present in the world. But when participation in the faith community is absent, the ecclesial sign cannot function – as symbol – for the beholder. The authentic symbol is an expression of the community's shared traditions, history and experiences, and hence only for one participating in and

⁶⁰⁵ *Ad Gentes* 5.

sharing those communal elements, is an otherwise ordinary visible element empowered with the special efficacy of symbol (polyvalence, emotional engagement, strengthened commitment, communication of transcendent reality, and so on). Furthermore, the muting of the church's symbolic efficacy resulting from a lack of participation in the faith community, frustrates the instrumentality of the church, both in terms of the communication of revelation and of grace.

However, as an inquirer warms to the customs, traditions and heritage of the church and begins to participate in its rituals, understand its values and appropriate its history, the visible elements of the church take on their properly symbolic character for that inquirer. As the symbol of the church establishes itself as symbolic in the mind and life of the beholder, the symbol itself – the church – becomes increasingly efficacious. The beholder comes to participate in the event of revelation mediated via the symbols' communicative power – hence the church's instrumentality is realized as well. With formal initiation into the community, and full participation in its sacramental life, the church's visible elements achieve the status of sacramental symbol, thereby accomplishing, as instrument, not only the communication of revelation but of salvific grace as well.

The perspective of revelation ecclesiology, which emphasizes the revelatory character of the church in its sacramental efficacy, reinforces the understanding of mission as an ecclesial self-gift to the world. Just as revelation in all its forms – lived, enscripted, or Incarnate – is a divine self-gift to humanity that comes to fulfillment and achieves itself through the ministry of the church, so also the church itself, as a revelatory and sacramental symbol, gives itself in mission; gives itself as revelation, to the world

and for the transformation of the world, achieving itself as revelatory event in and through its missionary efforts.

2. Sacrament of Revelation For and To the World

According to the revelation ecclesiology developed earlier in this study, the sacramental sign of the church belongs to the special category of “revelatory symbols” – symbols which, it may be recalled, “express and mediate God’s self-communication.”⁶⁰⁶ The expression and mediation of the revelatory symbol correspond closely with the signification and instrumentality with which Vatican II described the sacramentality of the church. Indeed, “sign and instrument” is a useful encapsulation of a great deal of sacramental theology. Such traditional definitions of sacrament as St. Augustine’s venerable “visible sign of invisible grace,” or the Baltimore Catechism’s “outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace” fit neatly into the schema of “sign and instrument.” Sacraments are efficacious signs – signs that, imbued with the power to effect what is signified, function as instruments of the reality to which they point; in other words, symbols of divine reality. In the view of revelation ecclesiology, the symbol of the ecclesial sacrament is, by virtue of its referent in Jesus Christ, also a revelatory symbol. The sacrament of the church is a signifier, pointing to Christ, and an instrument, effecting the presence and grace of Christ, who is the revelation – the self-communication of God to humanity – par excellence.

It is not enough, therefore, to say the church is a sacrament without specifying the referent more precisely. The sacramental symbol points the participant beyond sensory perceptions to a transcendent reality. Hence it is necessary to specify more precisely

⁶⁰⁶ Dulles, “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 56.

what reality is being pointed to and made present. The council fathers did just this in the opening article of *Lumen Gentium*, describing the church as a sign and instrument of two things: unity with God, and unity of the whole human race.⁶⁰⁷ In numerous other passages the council specified further that the church is a sacrament “of salvation.” In fact, the most common phrase used by the council to describe or define the sacramentality of the church is “the universal sacrament of salvation” or some close variant.⁶⁰⁸

In addition to being a sacrament of salvation, pointing the participant toward the transcendent reality of true and eternal unity with God and making this reality present in history, the perspective of revelation ecclesiology recognizes that the church is also a sacrament of revelation, pointing the receiver toward the gracious self-disclosure of God and effecting the communication of revelatory truths to those who approach it as willing recipients.

How then does this vision of the church as sacrament of revelation impact the church’s mission, or its self-understanding of mission? For this we can turn most usefully to the second element used by the council to describe the sacramentality of the church, its instrumentality. To speak of the church as a sacrament of revelation is to claim it is an instrument by which revelation is effected, or accomplished. The church as sacrament of revelation does more than merely point us to divine revelation as a reality that has its own autonomous existence. Revelation does not exist apart from the event of communication between God and hearer, mediated symbolically. Rather, to speak of the church as the sacrament of revelation means that the church exercises and realizes an

⁶⁰⁷ *Lumen Gentium* 1.

⁶⁰⁸ See *Lumen Gentium* 9, 48; *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 26; *Ad Gentes* 1, 5.

instrumental role in effecting, via its symbolic mediation, the divine self-communication of which it is also a visible sign.

Sacrament is an efficacious sign, effecting what it signifies. Therefore the mission of the church as the sacrament of salvation and of revelation, is not only to point the world toward salvation, and the truths God has willed to reveal, but also to effect the salvific transformation of the world and the accomplishment (communication) of the divine self-disclosure to human persons. As a revelatory symbol, the church in its missionary work expresses and mediates God's self-communication. But as was argued in greater detail in chapter three, above, when revelation is understood as an event of communication, as Dulles understands it, revelation is intimately bound up with the mediation accomplished via the symbolic communication, for "revelation, as a communication from God to human beings, destined for their conversion and redemption, achieves itself only when it is received and responded to in faith."⁶⁰⁹

Of course, the salvific and revelatory elements of the church's mission are closely related and intertwined. As *Ad Gentes* teaches, "Missionary activity is nothing other than and nothing less than the manifestation of and epiphany of the completion of God's plan of salvation in the world and in the history of the world, in which God, through the mission, visibly completes the history of salvation."⁶¹⁰ The great content of God's revelation is the plan of salvation; the mission of the church includes the

⁶⁰⁹ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 220. Cf. note 38, on page 21, above.

⁶¹⁰ *Ad Gentes* 9, as translated in Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, II:1019. The Latin word "manifestatio" has a semantic range including "manifestation", "display", "demonstration", and "revelation." Indeed the phrase is at times rendered "revelation of" rather than "manifestation of." See, for example, Susan Wood, *Spiritual Exegesis in the Theology of Henri de Lubac* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 112.

accomplishment of both the communication of this revelatory truth, and the accomplishment of salvific incorporation into the life of grace.

Before leaving these considerations of the mission of the church in light of a revelation ecclesiology, it is necessary to recognize that while we may accurately conceive of the church's mission as transformation of the world, this transformation is not limited to the conversion of individuals and nations to faith in Christ as called for by the "go . . . make disciples . . . baptizing them" of Mt 28. The church also discharges its mission of transformation in the temporal-historical plane, through its work for social justice and its efforts to further the presence of the Kingdom of God, until that kingdom is definitively established at the parousia. In this, too, the church realizes itself as revelatory. An anecdote from Mother Theresa provides an eloquent example:

The other day a man came to our home for the dying; and he went and he saw one of our Sisters cleaning a man's body that was full of worms. He was eaten up alive. And then this man came out, came back to me, and said, 'I came here godless; I came here empty; I came here full of hatred; but I go full of God! In the action of that Sister I saw God's love; I saw God love that person.'⁶¹¹

B. The Unity of Revelation: Scripture and the Church

A second promising area of fruitful dialogue is a consideration of the impact of revelation ecclesiology on the question of the unity of revelation. By this I mean the notion that, as God is one, there can be no actual contradiction in revealed truths. Given that revelation cannot, by definition, contradict itself, seeming contradictions between two elements of doctrinal truth must be reconciled at the level of interpretation or reception of revelation. One area in which the community of faith has already formed the

⁶¹¹ "Centenary of Mother Teresa's Birth: Where there is hatred, I may bring love: Week 3," Mother Teresa of Calcutta, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.motherteresa.org/Centenary/English/August.html>.

habit of reconciling seeming contradictions at the level of interpretation is within the Sacred Scriptures themselves. Encountering passages within the canonical scriptures that seem to contradict each other, we have rejected the easy route of preferencing one over the other, or worse, of rejecting one in favor of the other. We have learned instead to accept as axiomatic that the two passages, both being part of the inspired canon and therefore not subject to error, cannot in fact contradict. Therefore, we have come to understand the task of theology in such cases to be to seek a greater understanding of the meaning of one or both passages such that the unity of revelation is preserved.

The same approach, unfortunately, is less consistently applied to the reconciliation of apparent contradictions between the perceived meaning of a scriptural passage (or the scriptural witness as a whole) and a doctrine of the church. In such cases one more often encounters a willingness to subordinate the authority of church teaching to the scriptural truth (as interpreted and received), leading to a decision to reject the teaching itself as in error or not applicable. A revelation ecclesiology challenges such an approach, not by suggesting that the authority of the scriptural witness is in any way subordinate to the teaching authority of the church, but by reinforcing the *a priori* conviction of the unity of revelation, and insisting upon an understanding that all revelatory truth is an expression and communication of the singular great divine self-communication in Christ, whether that truth is mediated by the sacred texts or by the sacrament of the church. In such a view, every mediation of revelation is subject to the revelatory truths mediated through other means, and it is this reciprocal subjectivity that ultimately safeguards the unity of revelation and the inerrancy of both.

1. The Church as Subject to the Revelation Mediated by Scripture

The relationship between the teaching authority of the church and Sacred Scripture is complicated; they are mutually dependent and mutually corrective. Vatican II addresses this relationship specifically in its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, saying Scripture and the teaching authority of the church “are so linked and joined together” that neither can stand on its own, yet “each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute[s] effectively to the salvation of souls.”⁶¹²

The inspired books of the New Testament were not given to the church from without. They were composed by members of the church in its earliest generations, and gathered and preserved by various local churches who venerated them. They were selected for inclusion in the New Testament canon by the leaders of the community according to the texts’ fidelity to the deposit of faith, the practice of worship, and personal experience of a salvific relationship with Christ. The books of the Old Testament, in contrast, were from the beginning read and venerated by the church which understood the great heritage of salvation history recorded in the Jewish scriptures as its own story and heritage. But like the books of the New Testament, the early church made these books its own as well, receiving the revelation contained therein in a new way, interpreting the writings from within the context of Christian faith, and drawing from them a revelation not previously received.

⁶¹² *Dei Verbum* 10.

In this sense it is right to assert that the Bible is the church's book, yet the dogmas and doctrines of the church remain subject to the sacred texts as judge and norm of revelatory truth. Vatican II stresses that,

This teaching office [of the church] is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit. It draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed.⁶¹³

The Scriptural revelation functions as a norm to confront the church and continually call it back to its authentic life and witness. Authentic revelation is mediated by the church only when the church's teachings, worship and mission are an authentic witness to Christ. In the absence of this authentic witness, what is received by one who participates in the sacrament of the church is something less than the self-disclosure willed by God. A revelation ecclesiology perspective thus reinforces the importance of ensuring that the pronouncements of the magisterium are in conformity with the truths revealed in Sacred Scripture.

2. Scripture as Subject to the Revelation Mediated by the Church

At the same time, Sacred Scripture cannot function as a norm for judging the pronouncements of the magisterium until it has been interpreted and received by the faith community. According to the council fathers, "the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ."⁶¹⁴ Thus there is an authority given to the church itself, apart from the authority

⁶¹³ *Dei Verbum* 10.

⁶¹⁴ *Dei Verbum* 10.

inherent in the Scriptures. While this does not suggest that the authority of the church, “exercised in the name of Jesus Christ,” is superior to that of the Scriptures, there is a certain priority to the action of the magisterium in interpreting the texts so as to receive from them those truths God has willed to make known.

Just as in the previous section it was noted that revelation is mediated by the church only when the church’s teachings, worship and mission are an authentic witness to Christ, so also considering the task and authority entrusted to the church we may recognize that revelation is mediated by Sacred Scripture only when the Scripture is authentically interpreted and understood, thus received, by the church. In either case, an insistence that there can exist a contradiction between the revelation mediated by Sacred Scripture and that mediated by the teaching office of the church results in a failure of the church in any of its functions (teaching, prayer, worship, mission, and so on) to realize itself as revelatory symbol.

On the other hand, when the issue is approached from within a revelation ecclesiology, and the overriding assumption is that of the church as instrument, rather than opponent, of revelation, the revealed truths mediated by the sacred texts and those mediated by the magisterium can be recognized as comprising a single revelatory symbol: a sign and instrument of divine self-disclosure. As sacrament of revelation, the church signifies and mediates (effects) the communication of revelation in all of its varied activities taken as a whole – including not only the proclamation of Sacred Scripture, but also its interpretation and application in the life, liturgy, prayer, and mission of the whole community.

C. Revelation Ecclesiology and the Necessity of Ecclesial Reform

Lest the emphasis on the unity of revelation, supported by an embrace of the revelatory character of the church, be seen to suggest that the church is above critique or irreformable, a balancing consideration of the impact of revelation ecclesiology on the issue of ecclesial reform is in order. Once more Vatican II provides the salient framework within which to consider the issue. The Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, makes it clear:

Christ summons the Church to continual reformation as she sojourns here on earth. The Church is always in need of this, in so far as she is an institution of men here on earth. Thus if, in various times and circumstances, there have been deficiencies in moral conduct or in church discipline, or even in the way that church teaching has been formulated - to be carefully distinguished from the deposit of faith itself - these can and should be set right at the opportune moment.⁶¹⁵

Not only is the church not above reform of various possible “deficiencies,” it is in need of such correctives on a continual basis. Furthermore, not only does the council recognize the possibility of deficiencies within the human exercise of the ecclesial life and structure set forth by its divine founder, but it is Christ Himself, according to the document, that calls the church to be diligent in its efforts to continually re-form itself to his image. Only by its on-going efforts to do so can the church realize itself as the true expression (sign, or better, symbol) of Christ, demanded by its sacramental nature.

Furthermore, the need for continual reform is not limited, in this teaching, to personal moral failures of individual members, groups, or hierarchical structures within the body, but extends even to the purview of church teaching, with one important qualification. Divine revelation, authentically received, is not, by its nature, subject to

⁶¹⁵ *Unitatis Redintegratio* 6.

reform. It belongs to the irreformable deposit of faith and requires a response of faith. The way in which certain elements of this divinely revealed deposit of faith are formulated and articulated within a constantly evolving social context, however, can be deficient and in need of reform. This qualification rests on the all-important distinction between the content of revelation and the on-going reception (event) of revelation. As Dulles has said, “the content of revelation is always God, not simply in himself but in relation to our world and to ourselves.”⁶¹⁶

With God as its content, the content of revelation cannot be subject to reform; therefore it is perhaps tempting to think that a revelation ecclesiology which claims the church itself has a revelatory character is also claiming irreformability for the church. This, however is a misunderstanding of the assertions of the revelation ecclesiology developed in this study. The distinction outlined above is important: the content of revelation (the divine mystery itself) is unequivocally irreformable; the event of revelation, particularly the processes, mechanisms and result of the reception of revelation are all subject to human limitations and failings, and therefore areas through which error, misunderstanding or misinterpretations can enter the process and corrupt the teaching as received. Once a corruption or deficiency has entered the process, and the meaning of the mediating revelatory symbol has been inauthentically received, such deficient meaning can be perpetuated as a problematic formulation of the infallible deposit of truth within the teachings of the church.

In Roman Catholic theology, on weighty matters of dogma the charism of indefectibility protects such corrupt formulations from entering the official

⁶¹⁶ Dulles, “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” 51.

pronouncements of the magisterium. Likewise, for matters of doctrine not attaining to the dignity of dogma but nonetheless solemn truths promulgated by an ecumenical council or by universal consent of the bishops, the authentic reception of the content of revelation is similarly protected from error.⁶¹⁷ However, on matters of church governance, matters of discipline, or private teachings by individual clergy, religious communities, lay persons or groups, such inauthentic reception of revelation can occur, and stands in need of recognition and reform.

Revelation ecclesiology serves to highlight this possibility for deficiencies in moral conduct, discipline, or even formulations of teaching, and emphasize the importance of constant vigilance against an inauthentic reception of the truths God has willed to communicate. It highlights the possibility of deficiency by clarifying the distinction between revelatory content and event, so the reception (and subsequent promulgation) of revelation is not conflated with the divine self-disclosure itself. Revelation, according to this view, is the reception, not merely the content. Yet it is only truly a revelatory event if the reception is authentic. In order to ensure that the content of revelation is authentically received as one approaches and enters into the world of the revelatory symbol, the hearer must be an active participant in the life, activities, history and traditions of the community, and the community of the church within which the church itself functions symbolically to mediate revelation must continually test new formulations of ancient truths against the validity of their own reception, experience, and faith.

⁶¹⁷ See *Lumen Gentium* 25; cf. Code of Canon Law, cc. 336 – 337, in *The Code of Canon Law: Latin – English Edition* (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983), 107.

Far from elevating the church to a pedestal of irreformability, revelation ecclesiology insists that it monitor itself diligently, and continually critique itself from within. The revelation ecclesiology view also, however, emphasizes the importance of active participation in the community – and thereby in the symbols of the community – as a prerequisite to authentic and fruitful critique. One who has not appropriated the heritage and traditions of the community, who has not experienced and acted in and with the community, is not in a position to critique the authenticity of revelatory meaning mediated by the community's symbols. Revelatory symbols arise organically from within the community as a result of shared history, experience, values, and mission. Such symbols communicate meaning authentically only within the context of common unity. For one outside the community, or only minimally participating in the community, to critique the formulation of revealed truth as deficient or in error is therefore illegitimate.

D. Implications for Ecumenical Dialogue

Ecumenical dialogue offers significant challenges to the concept of revelation ecclesiology. In this study I have not limited my concept of “the church” to the Roman Catholic Church or any specific Christian denomination; rather, I have tried wherever possible to use it in a broad sense, indicating the Christian church as a whole. Still, outside of Catholic circles, an understanding of the church as itself revelatory would likely be viewed suspiciously as an excessively high and perhaps even triumphalistic, ecclesiology.

One such challenge arises in connection with the central role that sacrament plays within revelation ecclesiology, for understanding the revelatory character of the church. Revelation ecclesiology is dependent upon an acceptance of the sacramental nature of the

church, and the unique modality of symbol that lies at the heart of sacrament, at least as the term “sacrament” is understood in Catholic theology. An application of the concept of sacrament to the church is not universally rejected outside the bounds of Catholic (Roman and Orthodox) theology, but is certainly less widely acknowledged among non-Catholic ecclesiologists. Furthermore, when the concept is accepted, it may be a rather different concept of sacrament than that understood by the term in Catholic thought.⁶¹⁸

A second impediment to the use of revelation ecclesiology in ecumenical dialogue is the continuing influence of the Reformation-era *sola scriptura* principle. There remains in our own day a significant reticence among Protestant theologians to admit any revelatory authority outside of the written Word (with the possible important exception of the person of Christ as the perfect revelation of God). Non-Catholic faith communities frequently insist upon the written Word of God as the singular and unique source of revelatory truth, hence would be very reluctant to consider an ecclesiology that suggests revelation, and authoritative revealed truth, comes from participation in the revelatory symbol that is the sacrament of the church as well as from the Sacred Scriptures. Indeed, in ecumenical dialogue such a view may likely be received as little more than a thinly veiled attempt to revisit the Catholic doctrine of Sacred Tradition as a source of authority alongside the sacred texts.

On the other hand, the sacramental character of the church is finding some acceptance among ecumenists, and a revelation ecclesiology can serve to challenge ecumenical dialogue as well as receiving challenges from it. For those for whom a

⁶¹⁸ For a good post-Vatican II assessment of the concept’s use, resistance, and acceptance within ecumenical dialogue, see Günther Gassmann, “The Church as Sacrament, Sign and Instrument: The Reception of this Ecclesiological Understanding in Ecumenical Debate,” in *Church, Kingdom, World: The Church as Mystery and Prophetic Sign*, ed. Gennadios Limouris, Faith and Order Paper No. 130 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986): 1-17.

sacramental view of the church holds some ecumenical promise, revelation ecclesiology may not be too large a leap. It may, in fact, provide a way to better understand the source of interpretational divergences as originating, at least in part, in the function of revelatory symbols within the community. An understanding that certain symbols function as instruments (mediators) of revelation only within the communities which recognize them as symbols, coupled with the notion that the church itself is a revelatory symbol, may provide an additional avenue toward understanding what is shared and what is not shared among different Christian communities. Tracing doctrines and principles back to the symbolic communication of meaning, received within the context of a particular shared heritage, may enable further clarification on how those symbols function within the different communities, and why. This in turn holds promise for a contribution to the search for ecumenical unity, and an aid in the discovery of new paths toward mutual understanding and fruitful dialogue.

E. Revelation Ecclesiology and the Question of the Closure of Revelation

A final significant implication of revelation ecclesiology concerns the question of the closure of divine revelation with the completion of the New Testament and the death of the Apostles. The very idea of the church, as a living community of faith, being of itself revelatory seems to some to contradict the unassailable doctrine that the revelation given in the Incarnation was full, definitive, and irreversible. Vatican II seems to insist upon this point in the early paragraphs of its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: “we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious

manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ (see 1 Tim 6:14 and Tit. 2:13).⁶¹⁹ Dulles notes that the New Testament, also, speaks of revelation as “something that has taken place – for instance the manifestation of Jesus as the Christ to Peter (Mt 16:17) and to Paul (Gal 1:12).”⁶²⁰ Furthermore, he insists, “revelation is complete in Jesus Christ, since there can be no disclosure above or beyond that whereby God fully and unsurpassably communicates himself to the world in the life, teaching, death, and glorification of his Son” – a point that can hardly be disputed without at least an implicit claim that there is a deficiency in the revelation of Christ, therefore a deficiency in Christ himself.⁶²¹

Gerald O’Collins has surveyed the teachings from Vatican II and some major post-conciliar documents, concluding that “revelation is understood to have been a complete, definitive and unrepeatable self-communication of God through Jesus Christ.” And yet, “almost in the same breath . . . this official church teaching also calls revelation a present reality which is repeatedly actualized here and now.”⁶²² *Dei Verbum*, for its part, balances the statement from number 4, quoted above, with statements such as this just a few paragraphs later: “God, who spoke in the past, continues to converse with the spouse of his beloved Son.”⁶²³ Dulles, also, is quick to balance his recognition of revelation as completed in the past, with a corresponding recognition that the New Testament also speaks of revelation in both the present and future tenses.⁶²⁴

In all of these cases, the conflict is illusory. Revelation is understood by Vatican II and other official post-conciliar documents, by the New Testament witness, and by

⁶¹⁹ *Dei Verbum*, 4.

⁶²⁰ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 228-229.

⁶²¹ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁶²² O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, 89.

⁶²³ *Dei Verbum*, 8.

⁶²⁴ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 228-229.

Dulles and O'Collins, to be *both* a completed, definitive divine self-communication *and* an on-going reality within the church.

O'Collins offers an important caution against the temptation,

to allege that present revelation is not revelation in the proper sense but only a growth in the collective understanding of biblical revelation completed and closed once and for all with Christ and his apostles.

It would be an injustice, he continues, to the claim of an on-going revelation to limit it to “the development in understanding of a closed and past revelation, but [deny] that it brings about an actual revelation of God.”⁶²⁵ This sort of growth and deepening of understanding is certainly an important element of the life and faith of the church, but that is not what is meant by the implication of revelation ecclesiology that revelation continues to occur – continues to be given – via the symbolic mediation of the ecclesial sacrament.

The claim of revelation ecclesiology is that when a participant of the community of faith enters the world of meaning created by a revelatory symbol – in this case the church itself – the symbol works to evoke from that individual revelatory truth of which he or she was not previously aware. As Christ is in the beholder, so the revelatory truth given by Christ is there waiting to be evoked, but that does not mean it is, in the proper sense, as yet “revelation.” What God wills to make known concerning himself becomes revelation properly so-called when it is evoked and made conscious, willingly received and embraced by the beholder, and thereby actually communicated via the mediatory modality of the symbol. This is qualitatively distinct from a “growth in understanding” approach to the issue. The revelation that continues in the church is a real expansion of

⁶²⁵ O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, 89-90.

revelatory truth, without however, any addition to the definitive revelation given once and for all by Christ.

Dulles speaks in this regard of “constitutive revelation” – that which is definitively given by God in the Incarnation – and revelation itself. Thus, “With the end of the apostolic period, which coincides approximately with the completion of the New Testament, the era of constitutive revelation came to a close. Nothing substantively new is added to ‘the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints’ (Jude 3), the ‘deposit of faith’ entrusted to the apostolic church (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14).”⁶²⁶ And yet, he insists, revelation is not complete without the church, for without the believing subject approaching the mediating symbol the revelatory transaction could not be completed. Therefore, while it is proper and necessary to speak of constitutive revelation as complete, definitive and unique (unrepeatable), revelation itself certainly continues to occur in the church:

God continues to speak to his people when they gather to hear the Scriptures proclaimed in the church (SC 7; d. OV 8, 21, etc.). He speaks through the voice of conscience (GS 16) and through the ‘signs of the times,’ which are to be interpreted ‘under the light of the gospel’ (GS 4, 11, 44). All these forms of ‘speaking’ may be included under the category of revelation, provided that they are not seen as adding to the content of the definitive revelation given in the Incarnate Son.⁶²⁷

The revelation given by God to human beings in Christ can be nothing other than a willing disclosure of God’s very self – of the essence of the divine mystery; if it were not, God would not be one. However, there is a great difference between what God has offered to his children – whether self-disclosure, or divine grace – and what we as finite beings are able to receive. As fully divine the communication of God in Christ is infinite,

⁶²⁶ Dulles, “Revelation as the Basis for Scripture and Tradition,” 111.

⁶²⁷ Ibid.

divine mystery – a font of truth to which the community of believers both individually and corporately will return again and again each time they enter into participation in the revelatory symbols of the church.

F. The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Symbolic Mediation of Revelation

Western Christianity has been criticized for its propensity to exhibit various forms of “Christomonism.” Because of this study’s emphasis on Christ as the referent of the ecclesial sacrament, the pneumatologically sensitive reader may feel it, also, gives too little attention to the person, mission, and role of the Holy Spirit in the ecclesial reality as a revelatory symbol. While the role of the Spirit in the symbolic mediation of revelation is not emphasized by Dulles, it is also not excluded or reduced in principle. All the same, it would be remiss to conclude this study without some reflection on the role of the Spirit in the symbolic mediation of revelation by the church.

Familiar passages of ecclesial institution such as Mt 16:18, “And I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church,” can appear to suggest that the institution of the church is the work of Christ alone, for it is “I” and not “We” who will build “my” and not “our” church. It is a wholly inadequate interpretation, however, as Leo Cardinal Suenens emphasizes, “to consider [the church] a reality wholly constituted and given structure by Christ.” Rather, “The Holy Spirit, no less than Christ, builds the Church.”⁶²⁸ Furthermore, it is not sufficient to suggest that the church is instituted by Christ, but later given life and movement, i.e., animated, by the Spirit as if the Spirit is given to an already existing and fully constituted ecclesial reality. Yves Congar, drawing on his extraordinary familiarity with patristic sources concludes that according to the

⁶²⁸ Leo Cardinal Suenens, *A New Pentecost?* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 9.

witness of the early Fathers, “the Spirit did not come simply in order to animate an institution that was already fully determined in all its structures, but that he is really the ‘co-instituting’ principle.”⁶²⁹

If, then, the church is both co-instituted and co-constituted by Christ and the Holy Spirit, and that church as sacrament is a revelatory symbol, there must be some sense in which the Spirit also shares in the symbolic mediation of revelation through the ecclesial symbol. However, “co-” does not necessarily mean “equal.” In the Marian doctrine which names her “co-Mediatrix,” for example, no suggestion is made that Mary is an equal partner with Christ in the mediation of grace; only that through her cooperation with the will of God, she participates in the divine plan of salvation and the mediation of grace, through Christ, to the world. In similar fashion, the institution and constitution of the church by Christ and the Spirit does not necessarily mean that the two are equal partners (though this is also not denied), or that they have exactly the same function or role in the mediation of revelation through the ecclesial symbol.

As a symbolic-expression of the Father, and as perfectly one in the unity of divine and human natures, Christ is both the fullness and perfection of divine self-disclosure, and the full and perfect human reception of that disclosure. But for other human persons, including the community of persons which constitute the church, the reception of revelation is an act of faith, made possible by the presence and work of the Holy Spirit within the community and the individual soul. According to the view which holds that revelation is only actualized when it is received (i.e., when the revelatory event or “transaction” is completed, before which it exists, to a greater or lesser extent *in*

⁶²⁹ Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 2:9.

potentia), the work of the Spirit in the accomplishment of revelation is absolutely essential. It is by the power of the Spirit that a revelatory symbol is approached in faith, rendering the beholder (individual or corporate), capable of receiving it as an expression of divine self-communication. What is offered by God, through Christ, is received, thereby actualized, by human persons, through the Spirit. Only in this way is the event of revelation fully realized and accomplished.

Concluding Remarks

The considerations presented here are only a sampling of the ways in which the ecclesiology argued for in this study might enter into and contribute to the theological conversation. I have tried to be representative rather than exhaustive in this regard; doubtless many other issues and questions could be added. Concerning questions of revelation, however, it is hoped that other questions and issues which may arise could fruitfully be addressed in some measure within one or another of the conversations suggested here.

The vision of the church constructed in this study and designated “revelation ecclesiology” is at once a significant expansion on the sacramental ecclesiology of the Nouvelle Théologie and Vatican II, and a short, natural connection between the ecclesiology of Dulles and his symbolic-communication view of revelation. Even the concept of the church as “universal sacrament of salvation,” codified in the council documents, coupled with the mission of the church to evangelize the nations and bear witness to the truth of Christ, invites the refinement of the doctrine into an ecclesial self-understanding as sacrament of revelation.

This study has relied heavily on the power of symbol to transform lives, minds, and actions – an understanding of which is only beginning to be embraced by theologians, though somewhat more so by philosophers or philosophers of religion. The symbolic realism embraced by Dulles, Polanyi and others has the potential to significantly deepen our understanding of many of the mysteries of the faith, including the nature of sacrament, of the church, and of the created order. May the conversation bear much fruit, in a never-ending pursuit of revelatory truth.

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