Church as Sacrament: A Model for Political Ecclesiology

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1.1

How are we to model[1] the Church's political agency? Given a conviction that the Church should be 'politically active', or a realization that the Church cannot avoid being political (since, 'opting out of politics' is itself a political option), how can we conceptualise the Church as a political agent so as to *enhance our understanding* of the existing agency, and to allow us to *form normative convictions* regarding the exercise of that agency?

This article seeks to begin to answer this question, which I believe to be fundamental to political theology. I understand by 'the Church's political agency' any political action by baptised Christians, corporately or individually, which the agents relate, explicitly or otherwise, to their faith in God's saving action in Christ. In other words, I hold that there is an unavoidable ecclesial aspect to all Christian political action, and that this demands that we develop a political ecclesiology. A 'global Northern' context necessitates that such a political ecclesiology be able to incorporate the reality that practising Christians constitute a minority grouping in the population[2], in general, and amongst political activists, in particular. How are we to conceptualise the Church's political agency in such a way that we maintain that Christian political agency has a distinct part to play in God's plan to restore all creation in the Kingdom, whilst at the same time avoiding advocating an ecclesial triumphalism?

In this article I argue that the model of 'Church as Sacrament', which, although of ancient stock, gained currency in Roman Catholic thought in the 20th century[3] is of great value to political ecclesiology.

[1] On 'models' in ecclesiology *see* Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1976).

[2] In this respect, the European context is very different from, for example, the context in which Latin American Liberation Theology developed, 'The great majority of Latin Americans are not only poor but also Christian', Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1987), pp. 6–7. This may well mean that our priorities in constructing ecclesiological models will differ.

[3] Although there are interesting prefigurings of the Roman Catholic interest in 'sacramental ecclesiology' in the thought of the 'liberal Catholic' school of Anglicanism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Thanks to Jeremy Sheehy for this point.

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The first section of the article explores the revival of 'Church as Sacrament' ecclesiology. The second section argues that the Church may be viewed as a Sacrament of the *Kingdom* as well as a Sacrament of *Christ*. The third fleshes out the political import in viewing the Church as a Sacrament of the Kingdom.

These issues may appear abstract and removed from the suffering and struggles of ordinary people, I am convinced that they are absolutely fundamental to developing the sound political ecclesiology necessary to fund Christian liberative *praxis*. If this article can go any way towards allowing others to develop such an ecclesiology, then I will be content.

1.2 *The Sacramental Model of the Church*

The fundamental turn in 20th century Catholic ecclesiology, having as its fulcrum the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council, may be characterised as one towards an ecclesiology of *Church as sacrament*. A succinct account of the development of this ecclesiology may be found in Walter Kasper's *Theology and Church*[4]. Kasper locates, correctly, the impetus for this development in 'the question about the place of Christians and the church in the secular world of today.'[5] The sacramental model of church is well equipped to 'offer a description of the nature of the church to people belonging to it and to those outside it', and is widely believed to be better fitted to this task than common alternative models. Thus Dulles,

> The institutional model seems to deny salvation to anyone who is not a member of the organization, whereas the communion model leaves it problematical why anyone should be required to join the institution at all. In order to bring together the external and internal aspects into some intelligible synthesis, many twentieth century Catholic theologians have appealed to the concept of Church as sacrament. Anticipated by Cyprian, Augustine and Scheeben, this type of ecclesiology emerged in full clarity in our own century.[6]

Kasper situates the genesis of this emergence in the work of Francophone theologians, citing Henri de Lubac, 'if Jesus Christ could be called the sacrament of God, then for us the church is the sacrament of Christ'[7] as an example. The theme was taken up within German and Dutch speaking theology (Kasper makes particular mention of Semmelroth, Rahner, Smulders and Schillebeeckx.) The concept of Church as sacrament found its way into the teaching

[4] Walter Kasper, *Theology and Church* (London: SCM Press, 1989) pp. 111–128.
[5] Kasper *op. cit.* p. 111.
[6] Dulles *op. cit.* p. 58. Both the 'institutional' and 'communion' models of church are described elsewhere in Dulles' book.
[7] Translated from Henri de Lubac, *Catholicisme* (Paris: Cerf, 1983), p. 50.

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documents of Vatican II, and Kasper stresses the indispensable rôle of European theologians in making this conceptuality available to the Council,

> The definition of the church as a sacrament can be found in a number of drafts drawn up after the first period of the council. The most important of these is the draft prepared by German theologians (including Rahner) and approved by the German bishops in December 1962. The Belgian theologian Gérard Philips then included the sacramental definition of the church in the commission's new draft of 1963. And it was retained from that point until the final draft was approved.[8]

It is obviously to the Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (1964)[9], that one turns in the first instance to find expressions of a sacramental ecclesiology within a Conciliar document. This Constitution states that, '[T]he Church, in Christ, is in the nature of a sacrament – a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all people.'[10] The unity of humankind is related here to the unity of which the Church is a sign and instrument. This represents an important development in the ecclesiology propagated by the Roman magisterium, in that it expresses a marked shift away from presenting the Church as an otherworldly 'perfect society', with no effective point of contact with 'the world' other than one of triumphalistic judgement.[11]

The concept of the sacramentality of the Church finds expression in other Conciliar documents. It is present in the Decree on Missions, *Ad gentes divinitus* 1 and 5, and in the Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium* 5 and 26. Of particular salience to the political theologian is the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*. This document, in explicating 'what the Church offers to society' states,

> The Church. . . . acknowledges the good to be found in the social dynamism of today, particularly progress towards unity, healthy socialization and civil and economic co-operation. The encouragement of unity is in harmony with the deepest nature of the Church's mission, for it is "in the nature of a sacrament – a sign and instrument – that is of communion with God and of unity among all people."[12]

It is opportune to flesh out what is meant by describing the Church as a 'sacrament'. The work of Karl Rahner, a *peritus* theologian at

[8] Kasper *op. cit.* p. 114.

[9] [LG]. The translation referred to for this, and all Vatican II documents, is that in Austin Flannery (ed.) *Vatican II : The Conciliar and Post-conciliar Documents*, (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1992). I have, in all translations of Conciliar documents, altered the translation of Latin nouns referring to generic humanity, in order to render the language 'inclusive'.

[10] [LG 1: 1].

[11] c.f. Dulles *op. cit.* pp. 31–42.

[12] [GS: 42] in Flannery *op. cit.*

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the Council, is instructive here. For Rahner it is axiomatic that 'the Church is not merely a religious institution, established to meet religious needs'[13] Instead, the Church is a sacrament of the eschatological triumph of God's grace in Christ. By this is meant that the Church is a *sign* of the action of God in Christ. This signification is not to be understood in a minimal sense, 'the Church is always and unchangeably the sign which brings with it always and inseparably what it signifies'[14] Rahner develops this notion of the integral relationship between signification and instrumentality through a theory of sacramental causality stated in terms of *sacraments as intrinsic symbols*. An intrinsic symbol is a symbol which effects that which is symbolised. This mode of causality is held to apply both in the case of the Church as 'fundamental sacrament', and in the case of the particular sacraments.

Rahner's emphasis on the nature of sacraments as signs raises the issue as to, given that signs in general can be more, or less, effective, whether sacraments *qua* signs can point effectively to that which is signified to a greater, or lesser, extent, depending on the performance of the human members of the Church. Implicit in this, indeed foundational to it, is the question as to whether the Church itself, as fundamental sacrament, can be impeded in its signifying vocation by the infidelity of its members to the calling to be Church.

Rahner's response to such questions is, in the first instance, to affirm the doctrine of *opus operatum*. God has linked God's grace irreversibly to the making of the sacramental signs. As such, the trustworthiness of God negates the possibility of a sacramental sign ever being utterly opaque to the reality signified. Nonetheless, Rahner is alive to the fact that sacramental signs are encountered sometimes as relatively ineffectual. In his essay, *Membership of the Church*, he writes,

> the fact that there can be a valid but unfruitful sacrament shows that a genuine and decisive Christian reality can exist on the visible, and sacramentally and juridically verifiable plane, without always being, in fact, an immediately effective expression and manifestation of an actual event of grace.[15]

The inherent plausibility in Rahner's stance on the possibility of sacramental opacity subsists in its faithful reflection of the dual Christian experience – both of the trustworthiness of God and of the failure of human beings, on occasion, to make good signs. His stance, furthermore, allows us to understand sacramental ecclesiology as having a normative, as well, as a descriptive aspect. To

[13] Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments* (Tonbridge: Burns & Oates, 1986), p. 11.
[14] Rahner *op. cit.* p. 19.
[15] Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations: Volume Two* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1963), p. 73.

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describe the Church as a sacrament is at once to affirm that it makes present what it signifies, and to declare that it is continually called to be more faithful to its calling as the fundamental sacrament.

1.3 *The Church, Sacrament of the Kingdom*

What is it, we might ask, that is made sacramentally present in the Church? What is the Church a sacrament *of*? Much of the type of Catholic theology under discussion has described the Church as the sacrament of *Christ*. It has also been described as the sacrament of *that which is effected in C*hrist – as 'the sacrament of salvation'[16], 'of saving unity'[17], 'of the encounter with God'[18], and so on. Of course, the distinction here is ultimately an unreal one, since function and ontology are inseparable in christological discourse. Christ's saving work issues from who Christ is; to affirm that Christ has come is to affirm that God's Reign has broken through in human history, hence the 'realized eschatology' recognized by scholars within, to varying extents, the books of the New Testament.

I want to suggest now that the effects of God's saving work may be summed up under the biblical category of the *basileia theou*, that is the Kingdom, or Reign, or Royal Dominion, of God. This may be understood as the eschatological outworking of God's plan for the Creation. The Church may, in turn, be described as the *sacrament of the Kingdom*. This concept has been exploited, for example, within Latin American Liberation Theology[19]. Amongst recent systematicians who have approached an idea of the Church as sacrament of the Kingdom, mention should be made of John Macquarrie. Macquarrie describes the Kingdom as the 'entelechy of creation'[20].

> It would be a commonwealth of free beings, united in Being, and with each other through love, yet since this is the love that lets-be, preserving a

[16] [LG 7: 48]
[17] [LG 2:9]
[18] Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (Franklin: Sheed & Ward, 1999). More precisely, for Schillebeeckx, the Church is the sacrament of the Risen Christ, who is the 'primordial sacrament' of the encounter with God.
[19] Alvaro Magana (1993), 'Ecclesiology in the Theology of Liberation' in Ignacio Ellacuria and Jon Sobrino (eds.), *Mysterium Liberationis : Fundamental Concepts in Liberation Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993) pp. 194–209. Magana writes of the Church being a 'sacrament of historical liberation' and a 'sign' of the 'Reign of God'; 'sign' here is used in a sense approximating to Rahner's 'intrinsic sign'. See also Boff & Boff *op. cit*. p. 59.
[20] John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1977), p. 391.

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> diversity that heightens the value of the unity far above that of any undifferentiated unity.[21]

The Kingdom, on this account, is more than the destiny of individual 'souls'. It is only within a cosmic understanding of salvation that individual destiny becomes intelligible.[22]

Macquarrie denies that the Church is to be identified with the Kingdom, rather, 'we may think of the Kingdom as the entelechy of the Church, the perfect unfolding of the potentialities that are already manifesting themselves in the Church.'[23] Again, 'one might hope that the Church, together with other communities of the Spirit, might be, so to speak, the spearhead of the kingdom in the world.'[24] Macquarrie has it, then, that the Church both manifests and advances (as 'spearhead') the Kingdom in the world. To hold this is, in effect, to believe that the Church is a sacrament of the Kingdom.

It need hardly be stated that the Kingdom is to be understood as a social and material reality[25]. This much has already been implied in Macquarrie's account of the cosmic domain of the Kingdom. From the social nature of the Kingdom it is possible to deduce the necessarily social nature of the Church as sacrament of the Kingdom. Because the Kingdom entails the corporate salvation of human beings, who are social entities, the Kingdom is, in itself, a social entity. Likewise, any sacrament of this human social salvation must itself have a social dimension. Thus the ecclesial nature of Christianity is not a contingent reality, but, given the nature of our salvation, a necessary one.

To say that the Church is a sacrament, or even the fundamental sacrament, of the Kingdom, is to claim that the reality of the Kingdom is not exhausted within the being of the Church. It is in the nature of a sacrament that the reality signified has a more expansive being than the mode of signification. The Body of Christ is truly present under the Eucharistic species, but the presence of Christ is not confined to the Eucharist. Likewise the Kingdom of God is rendered effectually present in the Church, yet God does not reign only within church walls. The equation of the Church with the Kingdom[26] represents a

[21] Macquarrie, *op. cit.* p. 369.
[22] Macquarrie, *op. cit.*, p. 368.
[23] Macquarrie, *op. cit.* p. 390.
[24] Macquarrie, *op. cit.*, p. 369.
[25] I do not say 'political' reality because, strictly speaking the notion of the Kingdom in its fullness contains the determinate negation of politics, that is of social conflict and coercion. In this sense the Kingdom is utterly apolitical! Political theology protests against the premature ending of politics, in the light of the ultimate ending of politics in the Kingdom.
[26] The *Radical Orthodoxy* school may be suspected of making such an equation on occasion, certainly in practice if not in explicit theory. See Simon Hewitt-Horsman, 'The Kingdom in Milbank : A Critique', *Theology*, Vol CVI, §832, pp. 259–267.

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return to triumphalist ecclesiology, and seems increasingly implausible in a secular age. Moreover, such an equation is politically paralysing – if the Kingdom is inextricably social and material, and if it is only made present in and through the Church, then the prospects for the political advancement of God's Reign, in societies where Christians constitute a minority, are bleak.

Whilst the claim that the relationship of Church to Kingdom is a *sacramental* one rules out ecclesial triumphalism and a reductionist account of the Kingdom, it also, conversely, affirms that the Church has a genuine and indispensable part to play in the economy of salvation. The next section will explore what might be inferred from this *politically*, in a context where, by all accounts, most Kingdom-directed political *praxis* is undertaken by agents who are not themselves professed Christians. Prior to that, let us review some advantages of regarding the Church as a sacrament of the Kingdom.

First, describing the Church as sacrament of the Kingdom brings the eschatological orientation of ecclesial existence into sharp relief. The Church points to the Kingdom, which will be fully realized at the end of all things, and will then be handed over by Christ to the Father. At this point, when 'sacraments will cease' the Church will be superfluous, and will cease to have a distinct existence. The Church is provisional and does not exist for its own sake, but rather for the sake of a reality larger than itself. The realization of this should guard against the overly introspective Christianity which, amongst other things, has shied away from political involvement.

Reminded of its own provisionality, the Church is reminded likewise of the call to humility. The notion of the Kingdom should serve as a check on the anti-evangelical triumphalism that has been so damaging in the past, as well as on the kind of 'ecclesiolatry' which would have us believe that the heavenly hosts will spend eternity singing 'one Church, one Faith, one Lord'![27] In pointing to the Kingdom as the entelechy of all creation the Church subjects *all* human institutions, all systems of domination, all power relationships, to an eschatological proviso. It alerts humanity to the fact that each of us can say 'Nobody Knows Who I am Till the Judgment Morning.'[28]

The notion of the Church as sacrament of the Kingdom helps us to make sense of the communal nature of the Church. The Kingdom is a social entity; it follows that any sign and instrument of the Kingdom, of 'communion with God and unity among all people'[29] is, of necessity, social. The distinction between 'Church as community' and

[27] "Thy hand O God has guided", *Hymns Old and New Anglican Edition*, 518, final verse.

[28] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 276–289.

[29] [GS: 42]

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'Church as sacrament' ecclesiologies is thus less absolute than may have been supposed. The Church's life as community is a sacrament of God's Reign. We can begin to see, as well, how the 'particular' sacraments of the Church can be described as 'sacraments of the New Society.'[30] If the Church *qua* community images a 'New Society', then it is to be expected that its characteristic actions (the sacraments) should speak of that Society in particular ways.

Importantly, making a clear distinction between the Church and the Kingdom, and denying the exclusive identity of the two, suggests a path towards solving one of the most pressing problems with sacramental ecclesiology. Frequently the proponents of such ecclesiology are vague in delineating the boundaries of the Church. Consider what Dulles has to say,

> The Church never fully achieves itself as Church, at least not in the conditions of this world. It is true Church to the extent that it is tending to become more truly Church. On the other hand, something of the Church as sign will be present wherever the grace of God is effectively at work.[31]

Rahner, likewise, seems to think that 'anonymous Christians' are unknowingly members of the Church[32]. This stance emerges from a hope for universal salvation which is, in itself, well-founded. Lacking an adequate conceptualisation of the Kingdom as being non-equivalent with the Church, however, these theologians have to extend the boundaries of the Church ever further. The logical outcome of this position would seem to be that Church and humanity become indistinguishable. From it also follows the somewhat patronising tone of much inclusivist soteriology – Moslems, Jews, Hindus, agnostics and atheists are all 'really' Christians, whether they want to be or not! A proper realization that the Church is the sacrament of the Kingdom, and that it is possible to participate in the Kingdom with out being a member of the Church, goes some distance towards removing this problem.

Most importantly, given our current concern, to theorise the Church as sacrament of the Kingdom is to root ecclesial life in social and material reality. The Kingdom is not a purely 'spiritual' phenomenon, in any dualistic sense. The Kingdom, instead, is the fulfilment of all things in Christ, the establishment of God's reign, the entelechy of all that exists. The Kingdom of God is relevant to the discussion not just of angels and souls, but also to that of human bodies, of localities and communities, of political structures and mechanisms of oppression. The Church is called to be both a sign and instrument

[30] Williams *op. cit.* p. 209.
[31] Dulles *op. cit.* pp. 65–66.
[32] Hence Rahner's notion of the 'stratification' of the Church, whereby the baptized are members of the Church as juridical organisation, and anonymous Christians belong to 'Church as humanity consecrated by the Incarnation', see Rahner (1963) *op. cit.* p. 86.

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of this Kingdom. It follows that faithful ecclesial existence will have an unavoidable political aspect.

1.4 *Living as a Political Sacrament*

What might the idea of the Church as sacrament of the Kingdom teach us about the political agency of the Church, in a context where (we might believe) Christians constitute a minority of those engaging in Kingdom-directed *praxis*? As was suggested earlier, there are both positive and normative aspects to the description of Church as sacrament. The statement that the Church is a sacrament of the Kingdom offers a rationale for the Church's existence. At the same time it offers a criterion for judging the Church's fidelity to its call to be Church. The Church, after all, is continually called to be more faithfully what it already is, both in terms of its signifying function, and as an instrument of the Kingdom. This section will explore how the Church, as political agent, lives out, and can live out more fully, its vocation as a sign of the Kingdom and as an instrument of the Kingdom. Part of the argument developed here is that signification of the Kingdom as a social and material reality leads inexorably to instrumentality, that is – to Kingdom-directed *praxis*. This is to say that, in Rahnerian terminology, the Church, as political agent, is an intrinsic sign of the Kingdom.

The Church by its life, in as much as it is true Church, shows forth and makes present the Kingdom. In true ecclesial existence we catch a fleeting, but real, glimpse of what human social existence is like in God's Kingdom. The authentic life of the Church will be inevitably counter-cultural in relation to human society in general, as Christians discern what, in human actuality, is not 'of the Kingdom' and seek to negate this in ecclesial life[33]. Within faithful ecclesial communities, then, people will be enabled to realize themselves in relation to others. No role will be defined abstractly apart from free agency[34], by the domination of economic factors, or by ideologies of gender or race. These will be accepting communities, in which each is valued in their own right, and in which none has a purely instrumental significance. Loving and meaningful relationships will exist, unmediated by the cash nexus. Such communities will point beyond themselves to the possibility of an unalienated humanity, and as such to a fundamental aspect of the Kingdom.

[33] *c.f.* Schillebeeckx's notion of the 'negative experience of contrast' e.g. in Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1990), p. 5.

[34] By which we must understand the agency whereby human beings freely co-operate with God's grace, given in sovereign freedom. My comments on gender should not be read as pre-judging the debate on women's ordination in the universal Church, although the considerations noted here are clearly relevant to that dabate.

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The communal life of the Church can, therefore, be understood as signifying God's Reign. Central to this life, of course, is the celebration of the 'particular' sacraments, from which the day-to-day life of Christians flows, and to which it is returned in thanksgiving. The particular sacraments focus, in concrete and discrete actions, the political signification of the Church as fundamental sacrament of the Kingdom. Crucially, the *Eucharist* foreshadows the Messianic banquet, the eschatological unity of humankind. It anticipates the realized Kingdom, in which all will participate in the glorious freedom of God's children. In the Kingdom all share in freedom with God, and with one another, in a sense foreshadowed and present in anticipation at the holy communion: 'the Holy Supper celebrated in the hope of the Second Coming of Christ inspires a new social vision proclaimed by the Gospel in the promise of the Kingdom.'[35] Moreover, the transformation of the gifts offered by God's People at the Eucharist, a transfiguration of material things, anticipates the Day when the whole creation will be transformed according to God's will.[36] In as much as these features of the Kingdom are proclaimed in the eucharistic celebration, they are already present. In respect of God's Kingdom the Eucharist (and the same can be said of the other sacraments) is an intrinsic sign. The Church itself, as eucharistic community, is in fact an intrinsic sign of the Kingdom – the word 'mass' derives from the imperative '*Ite missa est*', 'go you are sent forth'. The People of God are sent from their eucharistic sharing to *make the world like the Eucharist*, to co-operate in building the Kingdom on earth that they have prefigured at the altar. The *signification* of the Kingdom issues forth in, or should do, Christians living as *instruments* of the Kingdom.

From the sacramental nature of the Church, it follows that Christians have a vocation to be instruments of the Kingdom as a social and material reality. In other words Christians are called to be consciously *political* agents. What sort of political agents they are called to be, in the sense of what sort of *praxis* may be discerned currently to be 'Kingdom-directed', is an urgent question, but beyond the remit of this article. Here, though, attention does need to be devoted to the question of how the Church relates to extra-ecclesial political movements.

Much, indeed most, of the political activity Christians might discern to be Kingdom-directed is performed, in the global North at least, by groups and individuals with no direct ecclesial remit. This does not present a problem, given the understanding of Church as sacrament; central to our ecclesiology is the recognition that the reality of the Kingdom is not exhausted by the being of the Church.

[35] World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: WCC, 1982), 36 *c.f.* Frederick Hastings Smyth, *Sacrifice: A Doctrinal Homily* (New York: Vantage Press, 1953)

[36] *c.f.* Smyth, *Sacrifice*.

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More than this, it seems probable that for both pragmatic ('unity is strength') and pluralist ('no return to Christendom') reasons, Christians, both as individuals and groups, will fulfil their political call by working with and joining extra-ecclesial groups. In so doing these Christians are fulfilling their ecclesial vocation. Their political activity, as long as it is genuinely Kingdom-directed, has an ecclesial character merely by virtue of the fact that baptised Christians are engaging in it on account of their Christian faith[37]. The question remains, however, as to whether there are any specific contributions made by the Church, as fundamental sacrament of the Kingdom, to political existence, which could not, in principle, be made by another politically instrumental agency. Does the Church, corporately or as present in its individual members, contribute anything distinctive to political life?

I believe that the Church does make such a contribution, and that this contribution has two aspects. First, Christian political *praxis* is theorized explicitly as relating to God's Kingdom. Second, the Church as sacrament of the Kingdom relativizes all social forms. In the conclusion to this article, I now want to flesh out these dual aspects of the Church's political contribution.

1.5 *Anticipating the Kingdom*

The Church is not unique in showing us what the Kingdom might be like. Nor is the Church unique in containing those who, by their *praxis*[38], make the Kingdom more of a reality on Earth. The specific vocation of the Church is to be the fundamental sacrament of the Kingdom, the place where signification of the Kingdom is explicit, and where liberative *praxis* is continually related back to the Kingdom, of which the Church is an antedonation. Whilst a 'secular' activist may co-operate in bringing about God's Kingdom, the Christian does so whilst proclaiming 'this is of the Kingdom.' Moreover, as the sacrament of the Kingdom, the Church serves to subject all human social forms to an eschatological proviso. At any stage in human history the Church, by virtue of its being as Church, must proclaim 'this is not the Kingdom in all its fullness, God has more to give.' An implication of this is that Christians, in their vocation as political critics, should be alert to the danger of acquiescing in the *status quo*.

[37] Alternatively, perhaps we could say that *all* political activity undertaken by Christians has an ecclesial character, and that the fact that some of this political activity is not Kingdom-directed is testimony to the nature of the Church as being a *corpus mixtum* – a 'mixed Body' of sin and grace. Here I am arguing that certainly all *authentic* ecclesial activity is Kingdom-directed.

[38] More precisely – we might say, by their co-operation with God's grace, whether or not this is recognized as such.

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Much 'political engagement' on the part of Christians seems to entail an attempt at normalising the Church in relation to existing power structures, the accommodation of the Church to these and, albeit often with the best of motives, the incorporation of the Church ('a Christian voice') into them. It is, we must affirm immediately, inevitable that any politics, Christian or otherwise, will have as its major premise the existing social forms. This is true, if for no other reason, because the future must be built on the basis of the present. An absolute oppositionism is, therefore, impossible. Nevertheless, there is invariably a strong component within the Christian political task whereby the Church employs, what might be described as, a 'negative dialectic', in the light of the gospel, to existing social reality. Precisely because sacraments belong to the time before the fulfilment of all things in Christ, when sacraments will cease, the existence of Church as sacrament is a protest against the reification of any social form[39].

The Church points continually beyond actuality, and in this relativizes all social projects. Furthermore, by its very existence, it reminds those who may well be its comrades in struggle that human flourishing is not to be identified exclusively with that which may be achieved politically. It reminds humanity about the rumour of God, and of the redemption won in Jesus Christ, to be revealed on the Last Day. Relative to any circumstance in human history, the Church will always have, what Schillebeeckx terms 'a surplus of hope over against what has already been realized in history'[40]. The life of the Christian community expresses this hope within the human family. At the same time Christians seek to co-operate in making what is hoped for a reality. In the being of the Church, as sacrament of the Kingdom, these vocations of signification and instrumentality are mutually reinforcing.

The Church has a divine calling to show forth, and work for, God's Kingdom as a political reality, until the one whom we consent to in our sacraments, as present in his absence, fulfils all things. Until then we will approach, but never fully realize, that which will be shown in its fullness at the end of all things. The Kingdom is a material and social reality, present already amongst us, and capable of fuller realization. We are called, by virtue of our vocation as fundamental sacrament, to co-operate in that fuller realization. Yet, all our strivings are bound to fall short of the glorious fullness for which Creation is predestined. All our social forms, all our struggles, all our freedoms – all of these can be but an anticipation of what will be when Christ is all in all. For here we have no abiding city.

[39] See Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters* (London, Continuum, 2002) pp. 90–91. A fascinating piece on the provisionality of sacraments, in this case the Eucharist, and the political significance of this is Terry Eagleton, 'Irony and the Eucharist', *New Blackfriars* 83.981 (2002), pp. 513–516.

[40] Edward Schillebeeckx, *On Christian Faith : The Spiritual, Ethical and Political Dimensions* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), p. 64.

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