

## Review Essay

### New Works in Ecclesiology: A Review Essay

#### Books Discussed in this Essay

Nicholas Afanasiev, *The Church of the Holy Spirit*,  
trans. Vitaly Permiakov, ed. Michael Plekon  
(Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press,  
2007), 327+ pp.

Maximillian Heinrich Heim, *Joseph Ratzinger:  
Life in the Church and Living Theology.  
Fundamentals of Ecclesiology with Reference to  
Lumen Gentium*, trans. Michael A. Miller  
(San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 614+ pp.

Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics:  
New Endeavors in Ecclesiology*,  
trans. Michael J. Miller et al  
(San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 258 pp.

Richard P. McBrien, *The Church: the Evolution of  
Catholicism* (New York: HarperOne, 2008),  
xxviii + 496 pp.

Lawrence B. Porter, *A Guide to the Church:  
Its Origin and Nature, Its Mission and Ministries*  
(Staten Island, NY: St. Paul's/Alba House, 2008),  
442+ pp.

Roger P. Schroeder, *What is the Mission of the Church? A Guide for Catholics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), xiv + 159 pp.

Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church: a People Called and Sent* (Maryknoll, NY: 2008), xxiv + 312 pp.

Paul M. Collins and Michael A. Fahey, eds., *Receiving 'The Nature and Mission of the Church': Ecclesial Reality and Ecumenical Horizons for the Twenty-First Century* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2008), xxi + 145 pp.

Avery Cardinal Dulles, *Magisterium: Teacher and Guardian of the Faith* (Naples, Florida: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2007), 209+ pp.

Alberto Melloni and Silvia Scatena, eds., *Synod and Synodality: Theology, History, Canon Law and Ecumenism in New Contact* (Münster: Lit Verlag / Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005), 720+ pp.

### ***Introduction***

The great Orthodox historian John Meyendorff, at the outset of the Second Vatican Council, memorably observed that “the issue of ecclesiology, and not minor liturgical and administrative adjustments, or even ecumenical statements, will finally solve the problem of Christian unity.”<sup>1</sup> Given the massive output of books in ecclesiology in the twentieth century – called by many the “century of the Church” – especially

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<sup>1</sup> John Meyendorff, “Vatican II: Definitions or Search for Unity?” *St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly* 7 (1963): 166.

since the council, the inevitable question here is: how much closer to Christian unity are we?

The twentieth century was also the century of ecumenism, and one of the benefits of having ecclesiological and ecumenical developments take place more or less simultaneously is that scholarship on these questions has been forced to move from its previous apologetic and defensive postures to a much more open and engaging mode of inquiry. Christians have come to realize that they can no longer grapple with ecclesiological questions alone; ecclesiological questions are also, in large part, ecumenical questions, and so they must both be examined together. Hence our review here deals with a good many Roman Catholic works, but also looks at a large and very important ecumenical collection on synodality and at one major Orthodox work now in English for the first time. We begin with it.

*Ecclesiology as a Species of Pneumatology*

At long last we have in English Nicholas Afanasiev's great work, *The Church of the Holy Spirit*. As Michael Plekon relates in his superb introduction to this volume, Afanasiev's work was begun in the early 1940s while the author was a pastor in Tunisia, where he labored on the text without a library and over his kitchen table; it was not finished for nearly a decade, when it was defended as a doctoral dissertation in July 1950 in Paris. Afanasiev continued to revise it but it was never published in his lifetime, appearing posthumously in Russian in 1971, in French in 1975, and only now in English. Nonetheless, Afanasiev was, as Alexander Schmemmann recognized, a "genuine renovator in ecclesiology" (ix) who was influential in Orthodox and Catholic ecclesiology – and even among Protestants, as the book's foreword, by the archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, manifests.

Born in Odessa in 1893, Afanasiev and his family fled after the Russian Revolution, winding up in Belgrade for studies concentrating on canon law. After his move to Saint-Serge in Paris, where he spent the rest of his academic career, Afanasiev also, Plekon tells us, "taught Greek, and [his] work with

the New Testament as text further made him expert as an exegete” (xii). These two foci are abundantly in evidence in *The Church of the Holy Spirit*, which attends very closely to both scriptural and also conciliar-canonical texts. Later, Afanasiev would be drafted as an official Orthodox participant at the Second Vatican Council, where his influence on *Lumen Gentium* would be profound and is obvious to anyone familiar with the text; for this he was, Plekon tells us, given “credit ... in the conciliar *Acta*” (xiv). Almost exactly a year after the conclusion of the council, Afanasiev died in Paris in December 1966.

As influential as he was for both Catholics and Orthodox, Afanasiev’s ecclesiology has been criticized for not always interpreting the patristic data (especially that of Cyprian) correctly, and for what could be called his “localism,” that is, his great emphasis on the local Church which, he believed, enjoyed pride of place in both scriptural and patristic data over and against a falsely “universalist” ecclesiology that would come to dominate later, especially (but by no means exclusively) Western, understandings of the Church. Plekon hints that there is merit to both of these criticisms, but rightly stresses that before rushing to judgment, one must “locate *The Church of the Holy Spirit* within the scholarly context of its time, admitting that research has progressed, that other studies would have to be consulted and perhaps even some perspectives modified” (xv). Moreover, one must understand – against some of his dominant critics – that Afanasiev’s localism does *not* mean that the local Church is an “independent” Church unconnected from, or somehow standing over, the whole Body of Christ. As Plekon recognizes, “Afanasiev is almost obsessive in his insistence that the local church is *only the church in communion with*, along with all the other churches” (xviii). Moreover, this Church exists as such only in and through the Eucharist. It is, then, neither self-sufficient nor self-contained.

There are additional challenges in Afanasiev right from the beginning of this extraordinary and important book. Several times in his foreword, he makes claims that are incautious and far too categorical as when, e.g., he says that, following the battle against Montanism, “Roman law would penetrate the