3 CONCLUSION

Since at least the time of the Montanist controversy there has been in Western Christianity a tension betwen two different ways of viewing the Church. One way sees the Church principally as the congregation or community of the faithful and thus in terms of its members, whose association in faith is the principal reality of the Church. The other view sees the Church principally as the ensemble of the means of salvation—the "deposit" of faith, the sacraments, ecclesiastical office—and thus a supra-personal institution. In the latter view the institution, founded by Christ, precedes the individual believers, whom it has begotten, and constitutes the primary reality of the Church. In the former, the reality of believing members precedes all else. While both views concern essentials, the historical fact is that they have tended to compete and conflict with each other.

One explanation of the tension between them may be that the religious priorities of the institution, as represented by its officers, are often not the religious priorities of significant numbers of the believers. When the institution was believed to take precedence over the individual believers, as was the case in the High Middle Ages (the orthodox "Catholic" view, according to Congar),[1] the believer generally subordinated himself to the institution. But in the heretical sects of the 12th and 13th centuries the tension appeared openly and extensively. As the institutional Church, at least as regards the papacy, gradually lost in credibility from the late-thirteenth century on, the conflict grew more and more apparent and general.

As a result of his dealing with the Avignon papacy Ockham had certainly experienced a considerable test of his faith in the institutional aspect of the Church. His ecclesiology, in reaction, thus included a much stronger element of Church-as-community than was generally evident in High Medieval ecclesiologies, but because he did not reject the Church as institution it also contained a tension between the two views. In his case, however, the tension is less between institutional and congregational aspects than between two divine laws for the Church. The restrictions, qualifications, and conditions we have noted all amount to a fundamental distinction between the regular and the occasional (exceptional, "casual") functioning of the Church. Office has its divinely constituted place in the regular but not necessarily in the exceptional function. Therefore, there is a double law at work in the Church, a divine institutional law and a divine occasional law.[2] The divine institutional law would encourage and justify the institutional view of the Church, while the

divine occasional law is closely related to the "congregational" view, since the occasional law is able to detach the official function of the Church from the institutional office and bestow it non-structurally upon the congregation (whole or part) or individual.

But there is another difference between Ockham's treatment of the Church's tensions and traditional attitudes. Heretofore conflict could arise precisely because institution and congregation, both stemming from Christ, existed in the same order of divine sanction. They had equal lineage and inheritance, as it were. For Ockham, in practice if not in theory, they are not equal. Ockham traces the institution to Christ, but in practice, as we have seen, because office is open to occasional, non-official intervention and pre-emption on the part of the congregation, it is always in principle vulnerable to challenge. Though the authority for such interventions is of divine origin, the interventions are pursued according to the human judgment of the believer or believers as to what practical measures are required, as well as how and when they are to be effected. The authority of office, not being able to prevail against such interventions, cannot be termed divine without qualification, unlike "Catholic truths" and the sacraments. At any time the divine will may operate through the non-official congregation and subject Church authority to the faith-prerogatives and practical decisions of the believers. The effect is to detach office and structure from the unconditional divine reality of the Church. Church office is not "divine" in the way faith and sacraments are, since his acknowledgment of its divine authority is more verbal than real.

Ockham does not appear to face up to this lack of coherence in his ecclesiolog, a Church divinely instituted in its faith, fellowship, offices, and sacraments, and yet having a divine guarantee which ignores the institution itself. However non-problematic such a view will come to seem after the Reformation, it was a strange one indeed for a medieval theologian claiming to be orthodox, a view which departs from the very strong consensus of ten or eleven centuries of Christian thinking about the Church. How would he explain the isolation of one divinely-instituted element from the others? On what theoretical grounds would he justify his alienation of the structure of the Church from the Church's inner reality and essential function, when the same Lord has given both? He does not say; and the apparent reason is that he did not see this alienation either as fact or as problem.

It is true that any generalizations about Ockham's ecclesiology must remain somewhat tentative in view of the occasional, non-systematic and polemical character of his ecclesiological writings, but that very character perhaps tells us something. In a polemically charged atmosphere he should have regarded so untraditional an alienation as an obvious challenge to received notions, which required justification and defense. That Ockham omitted such a defense would seem to suggest that he had not noticed his having taken away with one hand what he had given with the other: that he had presented divine institution without divine *guarantee*. If his opponents

noticed it they have not singled it out, probably regarding that particular alienation as the least of his offenses.

Ockham appears never to have seen the incompatibility inherent in his acceptance of the structured-hierarchical institution of the Church by Christ and his treatment of the Church as faith-communion. For him the Church is a society at once divine and human—not, as in more traditional medieval views, divine in institution and means, human in membership—but both divine and human in institutional means also. It is not true that this view of the Church separates the visible from the invisible elements, as though only the invisible were the true Church.[3] The Church for him is the visible kingdom of Christ,[4] and there is no separation of visible from invisible elements in the regular functioning of the Church. Even when the prerogatives of true faith must operate apart from or contrary to the regular institutional function, they have external and quite visible effects. True believers can summon the Church to a council; the college of cardinals—or any body of believers to whom the responsibility may devolve—may decide to elect no pope for a time: the clergy and people of Rome may depose their pontiff, etc. All of these are external, social actions with quite visible, social consequences. True belief here is wedded to the visible, social elements of 'political' action and even structural change. There is to be no separation between visible and invisible, and no allocation of the reality of the Church strictly to the invisible functioning of faith. Ockham does not present two forms of the Church, but rather two laws for the Church, both intended to be taken as divine. There is the normative, regular law of the institution and the higher law of faith which authorizes the occasional or emergency intervention. But while the true Faith and the fellowship created by it are unconditional divine realities, the institutional office is not. There is thus an alternating of divine laws for the Church which divides its authority and which in practice could hardly avoid surrendering the Church to the struggle of competing claims. This division—a division which is not seen as disrupting the unity of the Church but as occurring within it—characterizes Ockham's ecclesiology more than does the tension between institutional means and congregation.

How then does Ockham arrive at this view of the Church? At the outset he appears to have seen the problem as one of holding together his belief in the indefectibility of faith in the Church and the fact that the highest authority of the Church was in heresy. He saw the necessity of relating the prayer and promise of Christ to a Church viewed in dissociation from its hierarchical structure. He had to view the reality of the Church, that is, its very nature, in a new way. Christ's prayer and promise must concern the Church's true nature and object and this must be separable from the traditional structures. During the course of this study we have repeated again and again: "The Church *as object* of prayer and promise. . . ." This has not been done to indicate that Ockham merely insisted on one particular aspect of the Church's nature and life, but to show that for him what Christ prayed for and promised must have

been what the Church is really all about. And this, he concluded, is to be a congregation called together by God for true belief, a congregation of believers. All else in the Church's reality—divinely instituted office and even the divinely efficacious sacraments—is of secondary value.

At this point it would seem that he faced two principal tasks. The first was to show how the inner nature of the Church could be disengaged from its structures, while at the same time acknowledging the divine validity of those structures. The second was to find a view of the totality of the Church which would at once justify the efficacy of prayer and promise and show how the Church could be a congregation of true believers.

The first task consists in showing how something which was divinely instituted is nevertheless not of absolute and unquestionable, but rather of relative and conditional value. Ockham's efforts here were ingenious, if as we have said, ultimately unsuccessful. To meet this challenge he adopted the strategy of setting the divinely-given values of the institution into the wider context of other values, also divinely-given. God, who in Christ gave us the institution of the Church, also gave us the immutable divine law, the light of reason, which must decide some matters even of divine law, the Gospel of Christian freedom, and most of all Revelation itself, which must reign supreme over the Church and all its officers. Employing this strategy, Ockham did not need to challenge or deny the divine authorization of the Church structure; he had only to set out the larger context in which the limitations of official prerogatives would, he thought, be clear. No one would be disposed to doubt that the divine law is to be preferred to human law; and Church authority, though authorized by Christ himself, can issue only human law. The pope may have authority from Christ, but the people of Rome have, by natural law (which is really divine law), the right in given circumstances to depose him. (This right can of course devolve to the emperor, who, though a lay leader, is a member of the Roman Church.) The papacy may have been directly instituted by Christ, but the Church as a whole may always use its rational discretion—for reason, too, is from God—to judge whether or not at any time the filling of the papal office is opportune for the interests of faith. At certain times reason may judge that a plurality of popes is either opportune or unavoidable.

By the broad range he assigns to the discretion of reason—it presides over all matters except faith and the immutable commands of the divine law—Ockham establishes the relativity of all human arrangements and the rule of reason not only in human affairs, but even the affairs of the Church. The will of Christ establishes the rule of reason in the constitution of the Church.[5]

While never setting out an explicit hierarchy of values, Ockham continually rises from the consideration of authority in the Church and even from its constitution to the discussion of the natural and divine laws, where the will of Christ for the Church is more broadly expressed. Ultimately and most properly, appeal is made to the needs of faith (although these are

determined by reason). Most important among the restrictions of Church authority are those which are imposed by the nature of the Gospel, which is for Christians a law of liberty. Christian liberty demands that Church authority, even as vested in the pope, not command anything beyond the scope of the decalogue, since the Gospel does not so command. Within this scope no Christian is to be commanded in the ordinary course to any work which is only of counsel or of supererogation. The freedom of the Gospel is above papal law.

Ockham's sincerity in desiring only to limit institutional authority and not negate it does not really need to be questioned.[6] But the result of all his relativizations and qualifications is to make Church authority and structure appear in a novel light, strange to more traditional Medieval theologies. The Church of Ockham has been "de-politicized," its authority and function spiritualized.

The mark of this spiritualization is that the ultimate rule for the Church's order as well as its faith is that of Revelation itself—"Scripture and the doctrine of the universal Church." Since the latter have been given by God as the true Faith, it is faith which is the nature and purpose of membership in the Church. By faith we belong to a fellowship in Christ. True belief appears to constitute for Ockham the common good of the Church and its real nature, which is ultimately only to be a faith-community; and while he does not explicitly say that everything else in the Church, even its sacraments, exists only for the good of true believing, he does in fact subordinate everything else to the needs of faith. He may say that the Church is a visible kingdom, but its only true bond is the invisible union of faith.

The Church is essentially a faith-community because the prayer and promise of Christ—which must have been directed to the essence of the Church—were directed to the faith of its members. How then can the Church in its totality be the community of true believers? Ockham's second task was to explain this.

His problem here is obvious. In the first place, the Church could not be the community of true believers as a hierarchically structured society: the pope, the college of cardinals, the whole Avignon curia, numerous prelates and religious superiors were heretics, having denied evangelical poverty. The Church must be that community of true believers apart from its structures, and at times in spite of them. Is the Church that community as an aggregate whole? This, too, cannot be, since countless believers of past and present, besides those already mentioned, have lapsed from the true faith. There must be a way of viewing the community of those addressed by Christ which will allow that the faith promised will always exist in and for that community as a whole, if not in all its members.

That view of the Church as a totality of believers which Ockham forged in answer to his needs we have called the cumulative-distributive view of the Church. By seeing the faith of the Church as a cumulative reality (in its

tradition and as a single, historical object of the divine will) and at the same time as a reality distributed among its members, who separately can carry its prerogatives, Ockham tried to account for prayer and promise. But he seems never to have seen that his treatment is ambiguous. Prayer and promise are given to all and yet not to all. They are given to the whole Church and to no part, and yet may sometimes be realized in a single individual. The ambiguity can be precisely located in the question of who really are the object of prayer and promise: the whole congregation or the true believers. In the cumulative treatment Ockham's answer is: the whole congregation (and no part). In the distributive treatment it is: the true believers (even if they are few or one). Thus he never consistently interpreted prayer and promise.

Ambiguous too is his treatment of the cumulative reality of the Church as object of prayer and promise. The latter must be directed to a determinate object: they must function in the order of reality. As soon as they do, a distribution takes effect; the whole is actually always a distributed, never a cumulative, reality. The accumulation has been a merely mental act all along, although Ockham has spoken of it as though it were real. It is ironic that he, especially, should shift ambiguously between the real and the mental orders. The reality of the cumulative whole is not saved by seeing it as tradition or as the completed object of prayer and promise in the mind of God. Tradition as such is only the record of individual acts of belief; the terrestrial Church of all times exists in the real order only as distributed. But since the innermost unity of the Church is one of faith, if the cumulative whole of believers is not a real unity, *the Church has no unity.*

Thus the cumulative-distributive view does not really solve the problem. The "you" of Christ's prayer and promise must be interpreted as *either one or many*, and the cumulative whole is not one because it is not real. (Even the Church of any one age is not a cumulative reality in terms of the function of prayer and promise. One believer alone may have the true faith.) The "you" which is of course a multitude of persons, lacking as it does unanimity of faith, can be one not cumulatively but only as any multitude of persons is one: in terms of some kind of societal structure. Thus, whether he realized it or not, Ockham was faced with a dilemma. If prayer and promise were given to the Church as a unity, they were given to the Church living its historical life as *this* hierarchical institution and have thus been voided. If they were not given to the Church as structured they have no determinate, unified object and thus the Church as *congregation* of believers is not one.

Thus Ockham has left his interpretation of prayer and promise radically ambiguous: the Church as a unity is irreconcilable with the Church as a distributive reality, but Ockham's interpretation of prayer and promise involves both. In this perspective it can be seen that the whole business of devolvement is nothing more than a strategy to create a *functional* unity flowing from true belief where actually there is none. Ockham wants a real, functioning unity of faith without structure, but he cannot have it. Ockham's

Church is finally no definable, tangible socio-historical entity. An invisibly shifting number of believers with fundamentally indeterminable arrangements of authority and responsibility do not a Church make, in any empirically understandable sense of the word, certainly from the point of view of the believer of that time.

It was stated at the outset of this investigation that the attempt would be made to determine whether Ockham had an ecclesiology which was specific, distinctive, and coherent. It should be clear at this point that Ockham's cumulative-distributive treatment of the Church-whole is persistent and pervasive enough to merit being considered specific to him. He has, that is, a particular ecclesiological view. And until it can be shown that such a view, with its accompanying relativizations, can be found elsewhere in late-medieval ecclesiological thinking not influenced by him, his ecclesiology deserves to be considered distinctive as well. What it cannot be called, as we have seen, is *coherent*.

Ockham's atentuation of the validity of the structure of the Church, which underlies his ambiguous interpretation of Christ's prayer and promise, has left his ecclesiology hopelessly stranded. The Church is a faith-community but it cannot function institutionally with complete divine sanction; its life is faith, but that faith has no unity of subjects as it is no unified object of prayer and promise. That which can actually and effectually function in the Church is human and radically questionable: that which is divine in the Church cannot effectually and visibly function. Ockham holds to his faith that the Church is a divine work, the work of Christ. He is, however, unable to describe that work and so his ecclesiology is not ultimately viable. The step he would not take to make it viable, the denial of the divine institution of the hierarchical structure of the Church and thus of a divinely-given visible unity, was to be taken by the sixteenth-century Reformers.

What are we to say about the Occamist ecclesiology as it relates to what went before and what came after? It is indeed a transitional conception, and the tensions within it are precisely those between the conceptions of earlier times and those which were to come after. With the "high" ecclesiologies of the thirteenth-fourteenth-century curialists, he sees the Church as the divinely-institutionalized system of sacramental grace and hierarchical office of teaching and ruling, culminating in the supreme pontiff. In anticipation of Reformation ecclesiologies he sees the sharing of faith as fundamental to the Church, called into being by the Word of God. By faith God reigns directly and supremely, never surrendering His dominion to structure and office. With the High Middle Ages Ockham considers the hierarchical Church an institution of divine foundation; with the Reformers he denies ultimate divine sanction to the papacy, to a general council, or to any Church office.

The Church of Ockham is no longer that of Aquinas because it no longer has a unifying principle which adequately accounts for all the divinely-instituted phenomena. Even the unity of true believers is, as we have seen, no

true unity. There is no subsistent unity in the Church, the only accidental unity being the concordance in faith shared by those members who happen to believe the objectively true Faith. Perhaps Ockham's most striking departure from the ecclesiology of the thirteenth century is the disjunction he introduces between divine and human authority in the Church. The authority insofar as it is actually at their disposal, wielded by human beings, is never divine but always only human. The "vicar of Christ" in the papal office is for Ockham Christ's vicar in a sense vastly diminished from that which Aquinas held. The assymetry between the structure of the Church and its inner nature seems clear evidence of his general conception of the discontinuity between the human and divine spheres of being. The omnipotent freedom of God entails that He infinitely transcend the grasp of the Church, and since the members of the Church belong only to Him, *they* transcend the grasp and management of the Church's structure and of anything other than the demands of faith.

Here, it seems to this writer, one can see the justification for the opinion of Boehner that there are "inner connections" between Ockham's philosophy and his church-political thinking, as well as Kölmel's explanation that they are related ways of seeing.[7] But it is also clear that Ockham could easily have felt himself driven to his ecclesiology by a coming together of purely theological and orthodox considerations about the divine promises, the divine institution of the hierarchical Church-structure, and received notions about the poverty of Christ. In other words, he need not have consulted any of his philosophical tenets to arrive at his ecclesiology; but in arriving there he appears to have found it useful as well as natural to see the relationship of God to the Church much as he saw the relationship of faith to reason and to view the order of the Church as conditioned and contingent in much the way he saw order in the ordered parts of any *universum* as a contingent fact. More than this sort of relationship, it seems to me, ought not to be claimed for the connection between Ockham's ecclesiology and his philosophy.

As it is no longer the Church of Aquinas, Ockham's Church is not yet that of Luther. The difference is not only a different conception of saving faith or of such specifics as the place of Scripture in the Church, etc. Ockham still believes in that form of the ecclesiastical institution presented by the hierarchical Church of his day. If he has diminished its authorization irreversibly he has not yet accepted the consequences of what he has done, nor has he seen what the next steps would be. He disavowed the radicalism of Marsilius, who allowed the structure of the Church no more than the moral authority of suasion, who denied not only the primacy of the papal office but the divine institution of the episcopacy itself. And if he rejected Marsilius' affirmation of the authority and infallibility of the general council, he rejected as well his teaching of the sole sufficiency of Scripture.

While it has to be admitted that the effort was not finally successful, Ockham strove for a position intermediate between the authoritarianism and structural absolutism of the curialist ecclesiologies of thirteenth and

fourteenth centuries and the rejection of ecclesiastical Christianity implied by some of the radicals of his time. Perhaps because his Church-thinking has no ultimate coherence its main lines were not pursued in succeeding generations. His disengaging of structure from spiritual prerogative could indeed have provided a precedent for Wyclif's rejection of ecclesial authority not rooted in grace. His doctrine of an emergency transfer (devolvement) of authority to the community of the Church according to the needs of the situation was certainly taken up by the conciliarists and used in arriving at their tenet that ultimate authority resides in the Church as a whole, but as Tierney has shown, where he departed from the canonists the conciliarists departed from him.[8] The line thus traceable from Ockham's devolvement to later ecclesiologies manifests certain definite continuities, theoretical if not historical, but more can scarcely be claimed for the enduring influence of Ockham's conception of the Church.

It takes its place in the movement which had surfaced with John of Paris among sober and orthodox theologians at the turn of the fourteenth century, a movement away from the narrowly institutional toward a more "evangelical" conception of Church, which sought its spirit and sanction more directly in New Testament teaching, a conception which was to be consummated in the Reformation ecclesiologies. It took shape at a time when Christians were trying to hold to traditional views without any longer being able to accept the view of reality and truth which undergirded them. The intolerable tensions and ultimate contradictions to be found in Ockham's treatment of the Church are part of the general testimony of those times to the futility of trying to put new wine into old wineskins. They are perhaps not more characteristic of Ockham's thought than they are of the uncertain and groping spirit of the late medieval world.

[1] *Lay People in the Church*, p. 25.

[2] These two laws in no way correspond, as Köhler would have it, to the distinction Ockham makes between the *potentia ordinata* and the *potentia absoluta* in God, pp. 44, 66, 74. Both laws are already ordained for the Church in the divine will. They do testify to Ockham's constant interest in the dialectic between fact and possibility in a contingent world, of which he sees the institutional Church as inextricably a part. As McGrade has pointed out, *The Political Thought of William of Ockham*, p. 78, a "balanced dualism" involving the alternation of "regular"and "casual" power in both political and ecclesiastical life is Ockham's way of seeing the functioning of all lawful social order.

[3] Köhler persists in this misunderstanding, e.g., pp. 49, 54.

[4] *Opus, Opera politica*, II, p. 680.

[5] E.g., see *Opus, Opera politica*, II, p. 582. *Octo*, Q. I, p. 62. *Dial.* I, p. 654, ll. 7-15.

[6] As Tierney gratuitously does, *Origins*, pp. 235-36.

[7] See *above*, Intro. n. 1.

[8] Tierney, "Ockham, the Conciliar Theory, and the Canonists," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, IV (1954), 49-62.