

Fall 2006

Review: 'The Church Unfinished: Ecclesiology Through the Centuries'

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Doyle, Dennis M. (Dennis Michael), "Review: 'The Church Unfinished: Ecclesiology Through the Centuries'" (2006). *Religious Studies Faculty Publications*. 7.
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REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

The Church Unfinished: Ecclesiology through the Centuries. By Bernard P. Prusak. New York: Paulist, 2004. x + 404 pages. \$22.95 (paper).

FOUR PERSPECTIVES

I

Teachers of college theology have been experiencing the boundary line between theology and history becoming thinner and more permeable. Bernard Prusak has put together a textbook that is simultaneously a history of how the church has been understood and a sustained argument that the church has always been in a dynamic flux and must continue to change. At its heart the church is a champion of human freedom and creativity, and Christians of every age have struggled to respond faithfully to the particular challenges of the age in which they live. Today the church struggles with interpreting and implementing Vatican II, facing issues such as the developing ministries of women. The most important key to Christian fidelity lies in being open to new possibilities. Prusak sums up: "Now the question to ask is, would God create a process in which humans can choose among a surplus of possibilities for shaping a new future, but then completely predetermine the shape of the church for all time? It seems unlikely" (331).

This focus on change guides Prusak's selection and interpretation of his materials throughout. The incarnation is about how God in Jesus shares our human possibilities of creativity and love and reveals the fullness of those possibilities. Jesus' words and deeds and associations brought in the new and the unexpected. Those who remembered Jesus had to creatively rethink their memories of him in order to express them in the new post-resurrection situation.

The followers of Jesus should imitate him, not slavishly, but with a radical openness to God as well as to the marginalized. In discussing Jesus' founding of the church, Prusak emphasizes how the disciples needed to make their own creative decisions under the guidance of the Holy Spirit concerning how details were to be carried out. Ecclesial leaders of the present are called and empowered to make their own creative decisions, he argues, because the church must continually face the new.

Prusak's presentation of 30-110 A.D. draws upon the New Testament and other sources to trace the development of modes of authority leading up to the *mono-episkopos*. Throughout, his stress is on how little is actually known, on the variety of structures, and on the collegial style of Spirit-filled leaders making decisions as situations arose.

He acknowledges the legitimacy and continuing importance of the decisions that were indeed made, but always in such a way to set the stage for emphasizing further the ability of present-day leaders to make new decisions.

For the period 110-600, Prusak maps out the growth of the church into a communion of communions. Drawing upon a wide range of patristic sources, he discusses the emergence of the church-wide episcopacy, the lay/clergy distinction, the adoption of Roman structures, the origins of monasticism, celibacy, and the papacy. Throughout he explains the historical context of the particular challenges that gave rise to each development. Augustine is portrayed as an influential transitional figure who appreciated deeply how the structures of the church are in the service of communion, yet whose vision was passed on in an institutionalized fashion forgetful of his sacramental depth. Concerning the role of women, Prusak ends his discussion of this period with an excursus on the role of women, offering an extended analogy with the development of the U.S. Constitution and how the quest for dignity and rights within a tradition can take many years to come to fulfillment.

Increasing institutionalism, juridicism, and clericalism frame much of the story from 600 to 1400 as the church becomes the empire-like Christendom. Each move toward power can be understood as a response to real problems. For example, the reliance on law and centralized power to counteract lay investiture was intended to preserve the freedom of bishops in their local areas. The upshot, however, was a juridicizing of the church such that the sacramental elements were subordinated to administrative concerns. The reality of the church as a communion was stood on its head. Episcopal authority took the place of the Eucharist as the source of church unity. Art, popular piety, new religious orders, and various reform movements took shape as ways of holding on to the gospel amid the pressures of church-state struggles for power.

The years 1400-1900 saw the rise of ecclesiology as a systematic discipline. It was often given to polemical defense of ecclesial power in response to the Reformation and various forms of conciliarism and nationalism. In the nineteenth century, Johann Adam Möhler and others began anew to emphasize the theological dimensions of the church. John Henry Newman championed a dynamic sense of Catholicism as he challenged concepts of the church as timeless and monolithic. Prusak devotes considerable attention to understanding the debates surrounding the limits of papal infallibility. He sees in *Rerum Novarum* an opening toward addressing the signs of the times.

Prusak next moves to Vatican II, especially *Lumen Gentium* and

Gaudium et Spes. He emphasizes the presence in the documents of ecclesiologies in tension. Struggles over the meaning of *Lumen Gentium* reflect the difficulty of fitting together the church of the first millennium with the church of the second as they bear on today. Debates over *Gaudium et Spes* reflect a continued grappling with the modern world. Prusak notes how the church has embraced scientific claims rejected earlier and valorized concepts of human autonomy formerly under suspicion. He hopes for a future-oriented church open to further developments, with the role of women in ministry serving as his concluding example.

Prusak's ability to draw upon a wide range of primary sources in support of a vision that is simultaneously narrative and argument is impressive, to say the least. This work represents a much-needed synthesis of history and theology which will prove useful for courses in ecclesiology.

My assignment as lead reviewer is to summarize and then raise a few questions. I ask Professor Prusak if I am correct to interpret him as implying that those who are reluctant to make bold new decisions are either afraid of change or ignorant of history. Are there some Catholics who neither fear change nor ignore history but who would still oppose his emphasis on newness and the liberal agenda it implies? By putting so much effort into counseling the fearful and enlightening the ignorant, does he avoid wrestling with alternative historical narratives and counter-arguments of intelligent scholars who offer a more negative assessment of the state of modern culture and the need to adapt to it?

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II

Bernard Prusak certainly presents us with an historical *tour de force*, replete with rich documentation, in this survey of two thousand years of church history. Even though his method of organization is largely chronological, his selectivity from such a vast amount of material is governed by a number of recurring thematic motifs—communion, Eucharist, laity—and the thesis that the church has been and will continue to be shaped by human decisions amidst the pressures of historical forces. As far as possible, Prusak tells his story “from below” from the perspective of how ordinary people experience the church.

The amount of introductory material on Jesus and the early biblical witness is perhaps a bit unusual for most histories, especially since his concern is not to trace the various models of church in the various early Christian communities. Instead, he sets up his thesis by stressing the themes of the unexpected, openness to the future, pluriformity in