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# Otto Semmelroth and the Advance of the Church as Sacrament at Vatican II

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## Abstract

Otto Semmelroth played a major role in advancing the church as sacrament at Vatican II. His preconiliar works as well as his participation in working groups and committees were instrumental in introducing this systematic concept into the 1963 draft of *Lumen gentium*. His commentaries on the document disclose how his own understanding of the historical and eschatological dimensions of the church as sacrament was enriched through the process of developing the final 1964 text. Semmelroth's nuanced treatment of this progressive theme enables him to serve as a mediating figure in the continuing ecclesiological controversies of today.

## Keywords

church as sacrament, *Lumen gentium*, Mystical Body of Christ, Semmelroth, Vatican II

**O**tto Semmelroth, S.J. (1912-1979), contributed significantly to the documents of Vatican II, through both his preconiliar writings as well as his participation on a variety of committees. Although today he stands toay among the nearly forgotten of the council's *periti*, at the time of the council his name and work were closely associated with the concept of the church as sacrament that was so important to *Lumen gentium* and other documents.

Semmelroth taught as a professor in the Jesuit theologate at Sankt Georgen in Frankfurt, Germany. This article uses his work as a focal point for considering the church as sacrament in the 1963 draft of what would become *Lumen gentium* as well as in the developments that took place between the first draft and the final document. My article also aims to place Semmelroth's work on the church as sacrament among alternative approaches to ecclesiology present during and after the council.<sup>1</sup>

This article builds on a previous one that focused on Semmelroth's preconciliar work on the church as sacrament.<sup>2</sup> A study of his classic *Die Kirche als Ursakrament* as well as the prior *Urbild der Kirche: Organischer Aufbau des Mariengeheimnisses* shows how he championed an ecclesiology that envisioned the church primarily as a lay organization served by a hierarchy.<sup>3</sup> In a Catholic theological climate that regarded any attention to subjective faith experience with deep suspicion, Semmelroth endorsed the church as sacrament to acknowledge the objective reality of God's gift of grace, while emphasizing what it means to live out the reception of that

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1. I am grateful to the *Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst* for its generous funding of six months of teaching and study in 2012–2013 at the University of Augsburg where I completed the bulk of the research for this essay.
  2. Dennis M. Doyle, "Otto Semmelroth, S.J., and the Ecclesiology of the Church as Sacrament at Vatican II," in *Vatican II and the Public Arena: Figures, Themes, and Engagements*, ed. Massimo Faggioli and Andrea Vicini (New York: Paulist, forthcoming).
  3. Otto Semmelroth, *Urbild der Kirche: Organischer Aufbau des Mariengeheimnisses* (Würzburg: Echter, 1950) 85; English version: *Mary: Archetype of the Church* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963) 57–58. See also Semmelroth, *Die Kirche als Ursakrament* (Frankfurt: Joseph Knecht, 1953) 170.

grace. He managed to find in the sacramental theology of his time a model of call and response that could be applied to the church as a whole. Semmelroth simultaneously associated the church of the laity with Mary and her *fiat* as well as with the image of the people of God. Through his emphasis on each Christian's encounter with and living out of the gift of God's grace, Semmelroth contributed to the development of what at Vatican II would be termed the "universal call to holiness."

Semmelroth judged the concept of the church as sacrament to be not merely one concept or image of the church among others, but rather an expression of a basic principle that undergirded all understandings of the church: that the invisible saving grace of God is encountered through visible means.<sup>4</sup> In this way, the church as sacrament is linked with a supernatural ontology, situating the human response to God's call as a constitutive dimension of reality. Such an ontology is itself linked with a type of sacramental consciousness that perceives the church as the focal point of the graced human encounter with God. All other concepts and images of the church are particular and partial renderings of this mystery.

This article includes examination of two positions critical of the use of the church as sacrament as they were expressed in the early years of the council and represent schools of thought that reach back into the 19th century. Semmelroth's own ecclesiological approach can then be considered within the context of these other approaches in order to grasp something of the status of the concept of the church as sacrament in the 1963 draft. Next, Semmelroth's own commentaries on *Lumen gentium* serve as sources for examining changes between the 1963 draft

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4. Otto Semmelroth, "Um die Einheit des Kirchenbegriffs," in *Fragen der Theologie Heute*, ed.

Johannes Feiner et. al. (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1959) 319–35, at 326.

and the final 1964 document. I conclude by offering reflections on Semmelroth's role as a mediating figure among contending groups.

### **Controversy over Speaking of the Church as Sacrament**

On October 1, 1963 Cardinal Ernesto Ruffini put on the floor of the council one of two major challenges to the concept of the church as sacrament. This was one day after Cardinal Joseph Frings, also on the floor of the council, had requested on behalf of 66 German and Scandinavian Fathers that more explicit emphasis be given to the church as *Ursakrament*.<sup>5</sup> Ruffini argued that, “as everyone knows,” the term “sacrament” is reserved in its proper sense for the seven sacraments, that the application of the term to the church obscures this, and that this new usage is associated with George Tyrrell, a leading figure among the Modernists.<sup>6</sup> On November 18, 1963,

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5. See Yves Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, trans. Mary John Ronayne and Mary Cecily Boulding (2002; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2012) 322. In a footnote, Congar adds, “O. Semmelroth had first highlighted this expression in order to describe the church.” See also Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, eds., *History of Vatican II*, 5 vols. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995–2005) 3:44.

6. Ruffini's intervention is available in *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, vol. 1, pt. 4 (Vatican City: Vatican, 1971) 391–95. It can also be found in Gil Hellín, *Constitutio dogmatica De Ecclesia Lumen Gentium, Concilii Vatican II Synopsis* (Vatican City: Vatican, 1995) 1027–29. Ruffini and Fenton's opposition to the church as sacrament is discussed in Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* (London: Blackwell, 2007) 5–7.

American Monsignor Joseph Clifford Fenton submitted to the doctrinal commission a single page containing *Observationes* concerning the use of the word “sacrament” as a designation for the Catholic Church.<sup>7</sup> Fenton, known to hold traditionalist views, served as a *peritus* for Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani and worked closely with Ruffini.

Fenton complained that using the proper theological term “sacrament” to designate the church is relatively new, originating among Catholics in a 1953 book by Semmelroth. This designation is most commonly used in The Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Germany, but not at all in English-speaking lands. Speaking of the church as if it were a sacrament originated in the English-speaking world in Tyrrell’s writings.<sup>8</sup> Fenton observed that if this word were to appear in the teachings of the council, it would seem to Americans, as well as to other English speakers, to be a justification of Tyrrell over and against Pius X. Fenton also added that

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7. “Observationes D. I. Fenton circa usum verbi ‘Sacramentum’ tamquam designationem Ecclesiae Catholicae,” Document 0955 in the “Papers of Msgr. G. Philips” in the archives of the Centre for the Study of Vatican II at Catholic University [KU] Leuven, Belgium. My thanks to Peter De Mey and Dries Bosschaert for their help with my archival work.
8. Neither Ruffini nor Fenton cites a source. See George Tyrrell, *Christianity at the Cross-Roads* (1910; London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963) 275–76. See also David G. Schultenover, S.J., *George Tyrrell: In Search of Catholicism* (Shepherdstown, WV: Patmos, 1981) 313–15, 353; Peter E. Fink, S.J., “The Church as Sacrament and the Sacramental Life of the Church,” in Lucien Richard, ed., with Daniel J. Harrington and John W. O’Malley, *Vatican II: The Unfinished Agenda* (New York: Paulist, 1988) 71–81.; and Michael Kirwan, “George Tyrrell and the Theology of Vatican II,” in *George Tyrrell and Catholic Modernism*, ed. Oliver P. Rafferty (Dublin: Four Courts, 2010) 131–52.

“sacrament” is used elsewhere in the document to mean different things. The term is not scriptural, and it has not been applied to the Catholic Church since the time of Peter Lombard and especially not after the Council of Trent. Finally, claimed Fenton, the use of “sacrament” excludes the classical definition of the church as the “congregation or convocation of the faithful in Christ.”<sup>9</sup>

On the request of Bishop Joseph Schröffer, Semmelroth wrote a response to Fenton’s charges.<sup>10</sup> He argued that the Modernists’ use of the concept of the church as sacrament to deny a direct link between the seven sacraments and the historical Jesus was unacceptable. For his part, Semmelroth held that both the seven sacraments and the church were founded immediately by Christ. He predicted that the notion of the church as sacrament would soon be found useful and employed in English-speaking lands. He argued further that even if the word “sacrament” is not used in Scripture, its sense is nevertheless present in Scripture: any time an image such as the Body of Christ or the Temple of the Spirit is used, the church is being spoken of as a sacrament. Semmelroth cited the first edition of Michael Schmaus’s *Dogmatik* in support of the position that the concept of, if not always the phrase, “church as sacrament” is important to the liturgy and doctrine of the patristic period and the Middle Ages. That the sacraments are the vital actions of the church implies that the church itself is sacramental. The different uses of the word

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9. “Observationes D. I. Fenton” (see n. 7 above).

10. A description and discussion of the controversy between Fenton and Semmelroth is found in Günther Wassilowsky, *Universales Heilssakrament Kirche: Karl Rahners Beitrag zur Ekklesiologie des II. Vatikanums* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2001) 390–97. Wassilowsky found Semmelroth’s response in the archive of the Phil.-Theol. Hochschule St. Georgen/Frankfurt, 27.62.

“sacrament” in the draft of *Lumen gentium* are thematically interrelated and consistent with one another. In his journal entry for November 24, 1963, Semmelroth remarked that Fenton, in saying that his 1953 book introduced the church as sacrament into theological discussion, granted him decidedly too much honor.<sup>11</sup>

It was not just traditionalists, however, who cautioned against understanding the church as sacrament. The second major challenge at the time of the council accepted some use of the proposed designation while still stressing its limitations. In his work, *L'Église est une communion*, published on the eve of the council in 1962, Jérôme Hamer argued that in its most basic reality the church, as the Mystical Body of Christ, should be considered a communion, “a mystery of interdependence, a network of relationships among persons.”<sup>12</sup> Hamer operated explicitly within a theological tradition that he traced from Johann Adam Möhler and Carlo Passaglia through Clemens Schrader at Vatican I, and then from Emile Mersch and Sebastian Tromp through *Mystici Corporis*.<sup>13</sup> In the immediate background stood the first draft of Vatican II's *De Ecclesia*, a document representing this tradition.

Hamer feared that the concept of the church as sacrament could be used to overemphasize the visible dimensions. In traditional sacramental theology, although there is an inseparable duality between the outer and the inner elements of sacraments, it is still possible in certain cases to consider the outer elements as distinct and separate. For example, it is possible for a sacrament

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11. “Otto Semmelroth, S.J., *Tagebuch des II. Vatikanischen Konzil*” is being prepared for

publication. I accessed a copy of the *Tagebuch* in the Vatican II Archive at KU Leuven.

12. Jérôme Hamer, *L'Église est une communion* (Paris: Cerf, 1962). I use here *The Church Is a Communion*, trans. Ronald Matthews (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1964) 93.

13. Ibid. 13–34.



to be juridically valid even if the minister is not in a state of grace. Hamer named Semmelroth and Rahner as among those who, in using the sacramental concept, would allow secret heretics and schismatics to be counted as members of the church.<sup>14</sup> Hamer argued that the validity or efficacy of sacraments due to the interior state of their ministers cannot be applied to the church taken as a whole. He thought that in some ways it is helpful to see how the church is *like* a sacrament, but in this important case the analogy eventually breaks down. Secret heretics and schismatics have severed their membership in the church in a real sense, and it is not helpful to claim that in some precise juridical viewpoint they are still members.

Hamer judged that the communion approach, though not without its own limitations, has the advantage of always maintaining a focus on the inner relationships of the members of the Body of Christ with Christ as their head.<sup>15</sup> There remains an important interconnection between “an inward communion of spiritual life (of faith, hope, and charity) signified and engendered by an external communion in profession of the faith, discipline, and external life.”<sup>16</sup> Something corresponding to the sacrament approach, therefore, is built into Hamer’s communion approach. Hamer argued, however, that in the communion approach, the primary focus could not be on the external elements taken by themselves, because by definition the church is constituted by relationships within the Body of Christ. The external elements represent a type of communion that by definition is necessarily secondary and supports the inward, spiritual elements.

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14. Ibid. 88–91, esp. 90–91 n. 1.

15. Edward Hannenberg in “The Mystical Body of Christ and Communion Ecclesiology: Historic Parallels,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005) 3–30, establishes strong connections between communion ecclesiology and the Body of Christ

16. Hamer, *Church Is a Communion* 93

Hamer's example of secret heretics and schismatics does not speak directly to most theologians today. Even in its own time it did not capture all the issues that would arise in conceptual battles. Read closely, though, Hamer's example anticipates the later conflicts over positions of Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx, who used the phrase "church as sacrament of the world" in a way that appeared to their critics to emphasize the presence of grace in the world apart from Christ and the church. In contrast, Hamer's communion approach placed its emphasis explicitly on Christ by stressing the reality of the relationships among Christians within Christ's Body.

### **Some Background Points**

Both Fenton's attack on speaking of the church as sacrament and Hamer's assertion of the priority of the Body of Christ understood as a communion need to be recognized as expressing important strains of Catholic theology developed in reaction to the emergence of the Reformation and the modern world. I offer the following broad-stroke reflections not as a history but rather as a systematician's attempt to express and categorize a few background points. The debate about speaking of the church as sacrament is connected with long-term differences between the Catholic Church and other Christian churches and communities, especially those spelled out in terms of the relationship between the visible church and the invisible church. Roman Catholics have a history of defending the church as a visible society and the seven sacraments as founded by Christ in an objective manner that is not dependent upon the personal experience of individuals.

Throughout the first Christian millennium the church was thought of in a sacramental way.<sup>17</sup> From the twelfth through the 16th centuries, ecclesiological thought in the Latin West was influenced by the canon law practice of identifying the church with the hierarchy.<sup>18</sup> Juridical elements in Roman Catholic ecclesiology gained even more importance in the time leading up to the Reformation when some Reformers, at least as early as the Englishman John Wycliffe (ca. 1324–1384), claimed that the true church is invisible. In reaction, a Roman Catholic emphasis was placed on the church as a visible society. In Catholic theology, the connection between the visible and the invisible shifted almost exclusively to the sacraments, which the Council of Trent, echoing Augustine, called “visible signs of invisible grace.”

The modern world ushered in an approach to knowledge that placed a high value on skepticism over and against belief. Immanuel Kant is associated in the West with an epistemological split between the phenomenon (the appearance that one encounters) and the noumenon (the reality behind what one encounters). For Kant, one cannot really know noumena, only phenomena. It is not difficult to read these terms in an analogous way as similar to the visible and the invisible. Friedrich Schleiermacher, a seminal figure in modern theology, distinguished in his early work between an inner religious experience and its objective

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17. This judgment, often associated with Eastern Orthodox theology, is also closely associated with J.-R.M. Tillard. See *Church of Churches: An Ecclesiology of Communion*, trans. R. C. De Peaux (1987; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992).

18. Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church: A Study for a Theology of the Laity*, trans. Donald Attwater (Westminster, MD: Newman, revised 1965 [French orig. 1953; revised 1964]). See also Rose M. Beal, *In Pursuit of a “Total Ecclesiology”: Yves Congar’s De Ecclesia*, 1931–54 (Ann Arbor, MI: Proquest, 2009) 155–56.

expression in dogmas and rituals.<sup>19</sup> The secondary objective expressions correspond with the “visible” and the “phenomena,” whereas the true inner religious experience corresponds with the “invisible” and the “noumena.” Although in his later work Schleiermacher tried to correct the imbalance somewhat, in his early work the value of secondary expressions pales in comparison with the value of the primary experience. A sacramental theology influenced by the epistemological split in Kantian thought tended to stress the contrast and even the disconnection between invisible grace made manifest and the visible sign that manifests this grace.

Throughout his work, Schleiermacher presents Jesus as the one who had the initial experience of God-consciousness. The dogmas and rituals of Christianity are ways of handing on structures that mediate the possibility for others to have a similar participation in this experience. Although far from Schleiermacher’s conclusions, Johann Adam Möhler’s first book, *Unity in the Church* (1825), described the church as the outer expression of the inner workings of the Holy Spirit.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, Möhler’s later masterwork, *Symbolik*, placed much more emphasis on the external origin of the church in Christ and the importance of the objective revelation that Christ had brought. Official Catholic theology in the 19th- and early 20th-centuries, often standing in reaction to developments in the modern world, favored the approach of *Symbolik* over that of *Unity in the Church* and regarded with suspicion theological approaches that were experiential, subjective, or historically based.

In the wake of the French Revolution and ongoing political attacks on the Catholic Church, Christian belief, and religion generally in the 19th century, some of the official Catholic

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19. See Dennis M. Doyle, “Möhler, Schleiermacher, and the Roots of Communion Ecclesiology,” *Theological Studies* 57 (1996) 467–80.

20. Ibid.

reaction against the modern world is understandable. Still, many Catholic theologians had arrived at the judgment that standard Catholic ecclesiology as expressed in the theology manuals was itself overly juridical, impersonal, and static. A draft document using the Mystical Body of Christ as its most fundamental and organizing concept was put forth at the First Vatican Council in 1869.<sup>21</sup> But this draft was withdrawn and rewritten without being put to a vote. Its critics found it abstract and vague. Some judged it to be overly mystical and to undervalue the actual social reality of the church; others found it to be altogether ahistorical. As a result, three theological camps emerged from Vatican I: promoters of the antimodern theology, promoters of the personal/mystical theology, and promoters of the experiential/historical theology.

These positions are not necessarily mutually exclusive in a logical sense; one can simultaneously value aspects of all three elements. But in the 19th and early 20th centuries, those who promoted historical consciousness as a fundamental organizing perspective were, in official Catholic circles, considered aberrant. By the start of the 20th century, the Catholic Modernists were perceived as radically historicist and reductionist. The concept of the church as sacrament, an early version of which can be found in the work of George Tyrrell, contained strong experiential and historical dimensions. It suggests that the church is an extension of the saving work of Christ through time, and that the seven sacraments are particular manifestations of a sacramentality both prior to and broader than any particular expression. Pius X's encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* (1907) condemned the reduction of the sacraments to personal experience and historical phenomena.<sup>22</sup>

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21. Patrick Granfield, "The Church as *Societas Perfecta* in the Schemata of Vatican I," *Church History* 48 (1979) 432–35.

22. See esp. nos. 20, 21, 30.

The theological desire to identify the church with the Mystical Body of Christ continued as an effort to combat the impersonalism of an overly juridical view.<sup>23</sup> The Mystical Body is in itself potentially a type of sacramental view of the church because it brings together the mystical (invisible) elements with the social or institutional (visible) elements. When Pius XII in *Mystici Corporis* (1943) elevated the concept, he did not explicitly speak of the church as sacrament. Moreover, he stressed the combination of the personal and the juridical without a significant corresponding stress on the experiential or the historical, which were associated in the minds of traditional theologians with the subjectivist and the historicist respectively.

Prior to the publication of *Mystici Corporis*, the concepts of the pilgrim church, the church as sacrament, and the church as the people of God were all proposed by forward-minded

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23. Romano Guardini emphasized the church understood as the Body of Christ as a

*Gemeinschaft*, a community, over against the increasing impersonalism and anonymity of industrialized society. See his *Vom Sinn der Kirche* (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1922); ET, *The Church and the Catholic, and the Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. by Ada Lane (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1935). Personalism, although it existed in different forms, was a widely popular philosophical theme in Europe throughout the first half of the 20th century. It stressed face-to-face community over anonymous structures of society. (Guardini's emphasis on a personalist view of revelation as well as on the church as *Gemeinschaft* offer perhaps the best examples of personalism outside of *Mystici Corporis*. See Robert A. Krieg, *Romano Guardini: A Precursor of Vatican II* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1997) passim.

and/or historically-minded theologians as providing a corrective or counter-balance.<sup>24</sup> For these theologians, the turn to personalism needed to be deeply interconnected with a focus on how faith should shape human experience in the everyday world. With the rise of Fascist and Nazi regimes throughout continental Europe, these theologians grew in their recognition of the perennial danger of separating faith from ordinary life. Many experientially focused theologians did not take the turn to history, and so the following chart splits the experiential and the historical into two separate categories.

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24. On the pilgrim church see Robert Grosche, *Pilgernde Kirche* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1938). On the church as sacrament, see Carl Feckes, *Das Mysterium der heiligen Kirche* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1934). On the church as the people of God, see M. D. Koster, *Ekklesiologie im Werden* (Paderborn: Bonifacius, 1940).

Promoters of	Church	Emphasis on	Against the	Criticized as	Represented here by
Anti- Modernism	is a fellowship founded by Christ	institution for individual salvation	subjectivist and historicist	juridical, clericalist, triumphalist, and essentialist	Pius X, Ruffini, Fenton
Object- centered Personalism	is the Mystical Body of Christ	union of spiritual and institutional	overly juridical	insufficiently experiential, historical, and eschatological	<i>Mystici Corporis</i>
Experience- centered Personalism	as sacrament	lay reception and living out the faith	overly objective	subjectivist	Semmelroth
History- centered Personalism	as sacrament	humble and pilgrim church	essentialist	historicist	Chenu, Congar

The bottom three positions can all be contrasted with a strict anti-Modernism to some degree, though object-centered personalism comes to much more of a compromise with it. Experience-centered personalism retains a focus on the personal, and history-centered personalism retains an interest in both the personal and the experiential.

There exist various types of anti-Modernism. All four of the above categories stand opposed to the reductionist elements of Modernism as described in *Pascendi dominici gregis*



such as subjectivism and historicism. The terms “personalism,” “experience,” and “history,” can all be used legitimately to label a variety of ideas.

In relation to the concept of the church as sacrament, I associate the positions of Ruffini and Fenton with anti-Modernism. I associate the position expressed in *Mystici Corporis* with objective-centered personalism. I associate the preconciliar works of Semmelroth with experience-centered personalism. I associate the historical approach of Yves Congar with history-centered personalism.<sup>25</sup> I also associate *Lumen gentium* as well as the sacramental ecclesial vision of Semmelroth that developed during the 1963–1964 drafting process with history-centered personalism. For objective-centered personalism, the church may be hypothetically like a sacrament, but to protect the unique status of the seven sacraments, one should not say it. *Mystici Corporis* bordered on the oxymoronic in its attempt to achieve a position that is sufficiently personal without becoming subjectivist or historicist. Experience-centered personalism and historical-centered personalism can be interpreted respectively as attempts to include also the subjective and the historical without becoming subjectivist or historicist.

Prior to Vatican II, Semmelroth consistently stressed how his own work constituted an affirmation and defense of *Mystici Corporis*. Even when he was clearly moving beyond the

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25. Yves Congar, *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Église* (Paris: Cerf, 1950; rev. 1968); parts one and two in English as *True and False Reform in the Church*, trans. Paul Philibert (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2011). Congar cites M.-D. Chenu, “Réformes de structure en chrétienté,” *Economie et humanisme* (1946) 85–98, reprinted in the collection *Inspiration religieuse et structures temporelles*, ed. Henri Desroche, M. R. Mayeux (Paris: Ouvrières, 1948) 261–81.

encyclical's explicit teachings, he would claim that his positions were either implied by them or offered an extension intended to support them. This strategy was a common Catholic theological practice of his time, and Semmelroth engaged in it sincerely and loyally. If *Mystici Corporis* can be characterized as affirming the juridical and the personal without being subjectivist or historicist, Semmelroth's preconiliar works can be characterized as exploring how to affirm human experience without devaluing the juridical and the objective.

One could also put it another way. Various forms of personalism in philosophy, psychology, and other disciplines in the first half of the 20th century intrinsically included a strong focus on subjectivity and existential experience. For *Mystici Corporis* to offer a type of personalism while deemphasizing anything that sounded overly subjective was to walk a tightrope. In this regard, Semmelroth, who along with *Mystici Corporis* was fighting expressly against the individualism and impersonalism of the times, could be interpreted as trying to operate with a comparatively less-truncated personalism that could overcome individualism without discounting the importance of the experience of the individual.

There could be yet another row added to the above chart:

Promoters of	Church	Emphasis on	Against the	Criticized as	Represented here by
political- centered approach	as sacrament	church, world, and human progress	exclusively otherworldly	reductionist	Schillebeeckx  (as criticized by de Lubac)

I mention the political-centered approach here separately because, although it is important to Vatican II and to the concept of the church as sacrament, it appears to have emerged for Catholic theologians as an ecclesiological category during the time of the council itself (though it could of course be linked with various historical moments in the development of Catholic social thought). In the work of many theologians, elements of the political are often included along with either the experiential or the historical.

### **Church as Sacrament in the Drafting of *Lumen Gentium* 1962–1963**

The Council Fathers rejected the initial draft (1962) of *De ecclesia*. The best-known reaction to the document came from Émile-Jozef De Smedt, bishop of Bruges, who criticized it for its triumphalism, clericalism, and juridical view of the church.<sup>26</sup> His critique made clear that *De ecclesia* was not only hierarchically centered but also, at least to modern ears, sounded smugly condescending. *De ecclesia*'s main drafter was Sebastian Tromp, who had also been the main author behind *Mystici Corporis*.<sup>27</sup> The 1962 draft of *De ecclesia* reads something like an updated version of that encyclical.

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26. The text can be found in *Acta synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, 5 vols, multiple parts (Vatican City: Vatican, 1970–1978) I/IV 142–44; ET in Vincent A. Yzermans, *A New Pentecost: Vatican Council II: Session I* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1963) 204–7.

27. Walter Kasper, *Theology and Church*, trans. Margaret Kohl (1987; New York: Crossroad, 1989) 113.

This draft already contained the germ of many points still thought of today as among the advances of *Lumen gentium*.<sup>28</sup> For example, it states that the Holy Spirit confers gifts on the entire church, the *totus Christus*, some administrative and some charismatic. It refers to other Christians as separated brethren who by the working of the Holy Spirit are not excluded from the grace of salvation. It identifies the episcopacy as the supreme grade of the sacrament of holy orders and declares that the bishop has ordinary and immediate power within his own diocese. It proclaims that the vocation of the total Body is one, and that the laity, whose special role is in the temporal sphere, are called to action in the world and to cooperate in the apostolic mission. It speaks of the priesthood of the faithful and of how the laity are called to consecrate the world to God and to offer up spiritual sacrifices in the Mass.

The overall content and tone of the document, however, undercut these points. Semmelroth and Karl Rahner collaborated on a critique that surfaced problems of method and content and went deeper than De Smedt's stinging comments.<sup>29</sup> Their most important criticism, which can be read as a call to see and refer to "the church as sacrament," was that the document was missing an organic structure, a perspective, and a coherent ordering of chapters among themselves. They also found that the document needed to be more pastoral, lacked an ecumenical spirit, was insufficiently scriptural, and did not acknowledge differences in types of dogma as if

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28. I rely here on an English translation by Joseph A. Komonchak, "Draft of a Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," <http://jakomonchak.wordpress.com>; original text in *Acta synodalia* I/IV, 12–122.

29. This document, "Animadversiones de schemate "De ecclesia,"" can be found in Wassilowsky, *Universales Heilssakrament* 410–23. At 192–264 Wassilowsky analyzes the document and puts it into context.

all teachings were irreformable. Specific points of deficiency in content included treating the theme of Christian unity from the perspective of the Mystical Body, too narrow a view of church membership, an inadequate approach to collegiality, an unclear doctrine on the various states of the faithful in the church. The draft was also criticized for considering the function of the laity too exclusively in service to the hierarchy and presenting church authority in a manner that did not acknowledge concrete difficulties. The above concerns (and others) were all listed on the first page of what in its original form was an 18-page, single-spaced typewritten document. The pages that followed critiqued the draft point by point and in places line by line.

Semmelroth and Rahner, among their criticisms, offered alternative approaches. For an organizing principle, they recommended that the teachings on the nature of the church needed to be placed within the context of the history of salvation, and that the salvific function of the church as the sacrament of the world needed to be related to elements that are not as visible, such as the church's eschatological dimensions, its mystery, and its connection with the kingdom of God. They wanted a document that would highlight the church's bringing together of historical, visible elements with spiritual, invisible elements.<sup>30</sup> When it comes to the matter of the necessity of the church for salvation, it ought to apply not only to individuals but also to the collective unity of the human race. The church is the root (*radice*) sacrament of the human race, and this also relates to those who are saved by God apart from baptism. Their connection to the church should be seen as related not only to their subjective desire but also to their objective participation in the human nature that Christ assumed.

A most striking change between the 1962 and 1963 drafts was the use of the concept of the church as sacrament in the very first paragraph. This paragraph, inserted as a prologue,

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30. Wassilowsky, *Universales Heilssakrament* 411, section B, I, 1, e.

begins with the phrase “*Lumen gentium*” and says “the church is in Christ a sign and instrument, or like an intimate sacrament of the unity of the entire human race and of their unity with God.” An early version of this prologue came from the fourth and final version of the German Schema, of which the main drafters, along with several other contributors (including Joseph Ratzinger), were Semmelroth, Rahner, and Alois Grillmeier.<sup>31</sup> The German Schema was one of many documents that had been submitted to the main drafter, Gérard Philips, a Belgian theologian at the University of Louvain. These documents contained input from other scholars who supported the concept of the church as sacrament, including Edward Schillebeeckx, Henri de Lubac, and Yves Congar.<sup>32</sup> When it comes to making the church as sacrament a major organizing principle of *Lumen gentium*, however, Semmelroth stands out as a key contributor through his book on the subject, as well as through his direct input in the influential German Schema.

### **Church as Sacrament in the Drafting of *Lumen Gentium* 1963–1964**

Semmelroth’s preconiliar work of the concept of the church as sacrament had stressed its personalist-experiential dimensions as well as its function as an organizing principle in relation

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31. Wassilowsky traces in detail the process and content of the four drafts of the German schema in *Universales Heilssakrament* 277–353.

32. The German Schema can be found in Hellín, *Constitutio Dogmatica De Ecclesia Lumen Gentium* 716–50. Many other schemas can be found there as well, including ones from the French, the Belgians, the Chileans, and several individual bishops. The support of Congar and de Lubac for the church as sacrament was relatively more qualified than that by Semmelroth, Rahner, and Schillebeeckx.

to the various concepts and images being used to represent the mystery of the church. It stood in tension with the use of the Mystical Body of Christ as the primary controlling image of the church. The nature of its presence in the 1963 draft resounded harmoniously with Semmelroth's preconiliar work. Strengthening the more historical and eschatological dimensions of the concept remained a major task to be accomplished between the 1963 draft and the final document.

During and immediately after the council, Semmelroth published several commentaries on *Lumen gentium*, one on the document as a whole, others focusing on individual chapters. A study of these commentaries read against the background of his earlier works on the church as sacrament as well as in conjunction with his journal of the council serve to bring out his understanding of how the concept played out during the final year of drafting of *Lumen gentium*, and to offer some ideas about his own overall interpretation of the document. Semmelroth's commentaries show how many developments that emerged within the final document were connected with the use of the image of the church as sacrament, extending the range of concepts and images of the church well beyond its initial mooring in the Mystical Body of Christ.

*Lumen gentium*'s key achievement, Semmelroth maintains, is the supplementation and integration of various identity markers [*Kennzeichen*] of the church.<sup>33</sup> It was clear in his preconiliar work that he saw the Mystical Body of Christ as the image that stood most in need of supplementation.<sup>34</sup> At various points, Semmelroth discusses these images, either in their internal components or in how one image connects with another, in sacramental terms. In the

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33. Otto Semmelroth, "Die Selbstdarstellung der Kirche" in *Theologische Akademie*, vol. 1, ed.

Karl Rahner and Otto Semmelroth (Frankfurt: Josef Knecht, 1965) 65.

34. Semmelroth, "Um die Einheit" 319, 326.

following chart, I summarize the way certain images are presented sacramentally in the final version of *Lumen gentium* as explained in Semmelroth's commentaries.<sup>35</sup>

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35. These five commentaries on all or parts of *Lumen gentium* are referred to in the chart as S, H, M, L, and B.

S: "Die Selbstdarstellung der Kirche auf dem Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil," in *Theologische Akademie*, Band 1, ed. Karl Rahner and Otto Semmelroth (Frankfurt: Josef Knecht, 1965) 53–77.

H: "Die himmlische Kirche," *Geist und Leben* 38 (1965) 324–41.

M: "Maria in Geheimnis Christ und der Kirche," in *Das neue Volk Gottes: Eine Einführung in die dogmatische Konstitution "Über die Kirche," mit vielen Beiträgen*, ed. Wilhelm Sandfuchs (Würzburg: Arena, 1966) 102–14

L: "Kommentar zum VII Kapitel" und "Kommentar zum VIII Kapitel," dogmatische Konstitution über die Kirche, *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 12 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1966) 314–47. ET in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 5 vols., ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, trans. Richard Strachan (1967; New York: Herder & Herder, 1967) 1:280–96.

B: "Die Kirche: Das neue Gottesvolk," in *De Ecclesia: Beiträge zur Konstitution 'Über die Kirche' des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils*, 2 vols. ed. G. Baraúna (Freiburg: Herder, 1966) 1:365–92.



<b>Invisible—<i>Lumen gentium</i></b>	<b>Visible—<i>Lumen gentium</i></b>	<b><i>Lumen gentium</i> chapters</b>	<b>Semmelroth source of his comments</b>
church as Mystery	people of God	1 and 2	B 367-68
people “of God”	“people” of God	2	B 376
outer 4 chapters—mystery, people, journey, Mary	inner 4 chapters—clergy, laity, holiness, religious	1 through 8	S 64-65
universal call to holiness	clergy, laity, religious	3 through 6	S 68
heavenly church	pilgrim church	7	H 335-40; L 317
pilgrim church as containing its destination	pilgrim church journeying toward its destination	7	H 335
God’s love	church/sacramental presence of God’s self	5, 7	H 340
Mary in heaven	Mary our example	8	L 335; M109

The chart above is constructed from various points throughout Semmelroth’s commentaries in which he addresses, often briefly, the church as sacrament. For Semmelroth, these additional sacramental images and relationships do not replace earlier ones, especially the Mystical Body of Christ, but supplement and enhance them. Semmelroth could name many other sacramental images and connections in *Lumen gentium*; the ones in the chart are those mentioned explicitly in his commentaries.

Two types of development in the concept of church and sacrament need to be distinguished from each other. First, Semmelroth discusses how many single images within

particular chapters were developed with a focus on sacrament, that is, on how the saving work of God is being made present through visible signs.<sup>36</sup> Second, he explains how the organization and arrangement of chapters expressed several sacramental relationships that linked single images together. The depiction of the people of God can be used to illustrate both types.

A key development in *Lumen gentium* for Semmelroth is the decision to place a chapter on the people of God before the chapter on the hierarchy.<sup>37</sup> In the 1963 draft, the people of God had been introduced in a chapter devoted to the laity. Already in that draft, the threefold ministry of Christ as priest, prophet, and king is given to the entire people of God, not just to the hierarchy. The reality of the people of God is founded on both the word of God and the sacraments. It is an image with scriptural, historical, and ecumenical appeal.

Semmelroth recounts how the new placement of the people of God as its own chapter gave it a new weight. The people “of God” could itself be seen as a sacramental image by which this particular group of individuals is made visible within the “people” of God.<sup>38</sup> As chapter 2,

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36. In a yet-to-be-published essay, Peter De Mey treats the concept of sacrament as the structuring element of *Lumen gentium*, as he traces its presence in each of the document’s eight chapters as well as in several other key conciliar documents. See “The church Communicating Justification: The Sacramental Structure of the church in *Lumen Gentium*.” Among the many German sources that examine the concept of the church as sacrament with a focus on Vatican II and beyond are Josef Meyer zu Schlochtern, *Sakrament Kirche* and Wassilowsky, *Universales Heilssakrament Kirche*.

37. Semmelroth, *Tagebuch*, October 6, 1963.

38. I use quotation marks here to highlight the distinction Semmelroth made between the people of God, on the one hand, with an emphasis on the eschatological nature of a holy people in

the relationship between the people of God and the mystery of the church in chapter one became more evident. In combination the two chapters could be seen to speak to how the Mystery comes to be expressed in connection with the more historically grounded concept of the people.

Semmelroth thinks “people of God” promotes a personalist understanding in that it focuses on the church in history as a wandering people. He further emphasizes that historicity is a dimension of what it means to be human. Such a focus also allows for attention to the relationship between the church and Israel, including an eschatological element of a journeying people awaiting final fulfillment.

This historical-eschatological emphasis therefore adds a new element to the personalist-experiential themes developed in Semmelroth’s early works. His inclusion of the people of God in his 1959 essay, “*Um die Einheit des Kirchenbegriffs*,” anticipated a move toward historical concerns.<sup>39</sup> His strong emphasis on history and eschatology in his commentaries on *Lumen gentium*, however, appears to reflect something of his own learning experience through his work for the council.

Semmelroth finds that the eschatological theme is buried in the chapter on the people of God; it is more noticeable in chapters 7 (heavenly church and earthly church) and 8 (Mary). When the decision was made to integrate fully into the document what had been an appendix on Mary, the two chapters were thematically paired. In his commentaries, Semmelroth notes this pairing and discusses how each chapter impacted the development of the other.

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regard to the final stage of its fulfillment and, on the other hand, with an emphasis on a wandering people making its way through the desert. Semmelroth, “Die Kirche: Das neue Gottesvolk” 367–68.

39. Semmelroth, “Um die Einheit” 321–23.

The appendix on Mary had not been expressly ecclesiological, but the new chapter 8 presents Mary as a type of the church, incorporating many themes found in Semmelroth's *Urbild der Kirche* (1950). It connects her role as type with the Incarnation and the history of the saving work of Christ. Mary is a type of the church because it is the task of every Christian to enter believingly into Christ's saving work. Mary is already the fulfillment of the church, yet Christians can also relate to her as a human being who journeyed on this earth. She thus embodies in herself the eschatological connection between the heavenly and earthly church. The heavenly church is already present in the pilgrim church in its journey on earth. Mary in heaven represents the eschatological future of all Christians as present in Mary the human being who said yes to God's offer (and as related to every Christian, in that to every Christian this offer is made). In other words, there is not only a sacramental theme to be appreciated within chapters 7 and 8 on their own, but that same theme is also expressed in the relationship between the chapters.

The sacramental dimensions of the church in *Lumen gentium* contest individualism and impersonalism (which had also been major targets in *Mystici Corporis*). Semmelroth gives a detailed example of how an in-depth consideration of the heavenly church helps combat individualism. He refers to a centuries-old tendency of focusing on the destiny of individual souls, thereby emphasizing the purpose of the church as preparing these souls to attain eternal salvation in heaven. In this view, there is no need for the church to continue in the next life. Once souls are in heaven, the church's purpose is accomplished. Semmelroth acknowledges worthwhile dimensions in this view that need to be preserved, but it is not enough by itself. Human beings are indeed individuals, but they also have an integral social dimension. Salvation comes not as an isolated event to individual persons, but to individuals as social beings.

Semmelroth insists that the social dimension of our being does not end once we get to heaven. There is indeed a heavenly church, and the earthly church is related to it. The earthly and heavenly churches taken together make up the church as the communion of saints. The earthly church will finally come to its end, but the fellowship of saints in the heavenly church will continue to be enjoyed in eternity.<sup>40</sup>

In chapters 7 and 8 Semmelroth explains further how devotion to Mary and the saints supports the personal-experiential elements of the church.<sup>41</sup> Christians in today's world stand in personal (and sacramental) relationship with the saints in heaven. Mary, a created person like us, represents the church in its fulfillment and foreshadows our own destiny.<sup>42</sup> The saints who have gone before us in death are also people to whom those still journeying can relate in a personal way. Our grace-filled relationships with Mary and the saints are not mechanical but personal.

The personal-experiential dimensions of the church lead Semmelroth to develop these sacramental images further. He makes the case that an emphasis on the need for God's grace—as the personal revelation of God's love—combats the image of a sacrament as an objective dispenser of something called “grace.” This need impresses the desire to be accepted and charges the individual recipients to live out its implications in the concrete, historical world. Semmelroth argued that the divine gift dimension of the church must be realized existentially; otherwise, the church's visible dimension would be merely a shell for the invisible.<sup>43</sup> To point up the church's sacramental dimension, Semmelroth intercalates the chapters on the visible

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40. Semmelroth, “Die himmlische Kirche” 327–28.

41. Semmelroth, “Die Selbstdarstellung der Kirche” 71–73.

42. Semmelroth, “Kommentar” 335; “Maria in Geheimnis” 109.

43. Semmelroth, “Kommentar” 314–21.

church—the hierarchy, the laity, and the religious—between chapters on the church as a mystery and an eschatological reality.<sup>44</sup> That is, the invisible grace of the outer chapters is lived out in visible ways within the structures discussed within the inner four chapters.

Semmelroth finds a similar relationship between chapter 5 on the universal call to holiness and the surrounding chapters on the hierarchy, the laity, and the religious. By nestling the chapter on the universal call to holiness within the inner chapters, Semmelroth focuses the reader's attention on the visible structures and helps express even more what the church is called to become.<sup>45</sup> For Semmelroth, the church as sacrament cannot be expressed solely in a static image; it necessarily includes images that bring together the relationship between the invisible mystery of the church and its actual, concrete realization in history.

Beyond contesting individualism and impersonalism, the expanded range of images for explaining the meaning of the church as sacrament also further strengthen the themes of historicity and eschatology. These themes stand as counterpoints to previous ecclesiological tendencies toward objectification and triumphalism. Semmelroth regularly mentions that the times in which he lives call for a more humble view of the church, one that can acknowledge its own limitations and speak of its own sins.<sup>46</sup> The church needs to be able to compare itself with Israel as still wandering in the desert, still awaiting its fulfillment.

Semmelroth, however, is thinking of his present time as well. Of the presence of Christ's love in the church, for example, he writes: "That here we are referring to an eschatological

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44. Semmelroth, "Die Selbstdarstellung der Kirche" 64–65.

45. Ibid. 69.

46. Semmelroth, "Die Kirche: Das neue Gottesvolk" 368; "Die himmlische Kirche" 327, 330;

"Die Selbstdarstellung der Kirche" 68.

dimension of the church, therefore to a dimension present in faith and in hope, we experience painfully enough.”<sup>47</sup> For Semmelroth, the people of God and the pilgrim church bring out the church’s historical and eschatological dimensions in a way that enables the church to be more self-critical and less triumphalistic. In the context of his overall vision for the church, Semmelroth does not sound as though he is aiming his calls for self-criticism directly at the hierarchy. Rather, in his view the church is truly the people of God—it is at least as much a church of the laity as of the hierarchy—so his calls for renewal and reform are to be understood in an inclusive manner.

It is equally important, though, that as sacrament, the earthly church makes the heavenly church visible in a real way and in the present time. For Semmelroth the earthly church contains its destiny within itself, not simply in the way that the train from Hamburg to Munich can already be called the Munich train, but in the deeper sense that it contains the seed of its fulfillment.<sup>48</sup> The earthly church, through the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit, bears a gift of holiness. While this gift cannot be lost, it must be lived out. The church is the sacramental presence of God’s self-sharing love, a love that will be realized in the love of human beings.<sup>49</sup>

## **Continuity and Change at Vatican II**

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47. Semmelroth, “Die himmlische Kirche” 340 (translation mine).

48. Ibid. 335.

49. Ibid. 340.

Semmelroth's ecclesiology is remembered today as balanced and irenic. He warned against conquering one side's version of triumphalism by replacing it with one's own.<sup>50</sup> In the council's split between a traditionalist minority and a progressive majority, Semmelroth was on the side of the majority. Yet insofar as there was a nascent split within the majority between those who wanted more radical changes and those who wanted to slow the rate of change, he appears to have been a mediating figure.

In postconciliar developments, slowing the rate of change became associated with asserting the priority of the church as communion over the church as sacrament and, subsequently, privileging the Mystical Body of Christ over the people of God. Benedict XVI (before his papacy) had stated:

[In Scripture] "People of God" actually refers always to the Old Testament element of the Church, to her continuity with Israel. But the Church receives her New Testament character more distinctively in the concept of the "Body of Christ." One is Church and one is a member thereof, not through a sociological adherence, but precisely through incorporation in this Body of the Lord through baptism and the Eucharist. Behind the concept of the Church as the People of God, which has been so exclusively thrust into the foreground today, hide influences of ecclesiologies which de facto revert to the Old Testament; and perhaps also political, partisan and collectivist influences. In reality, there

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50. Semmelroth, "Die Selbstdarstellung der Kirche" 53.



is no truly New Testament, Catholic concept of Church without a direct and vital relation not only with sociology but first of all with christology.<sup>51</sup>

At about the same time, the Extraordinary Synod of 1985 emphasized the christological context for understanding the meaning of speaking of the church as sacrament:

The Church makes herself more credible if she speaks less of herself and ever more preaches Christ Crucified (cf. 1 Cor 22) and witnesses with her own life. In this way the Church is sacrament, that is, sign and instrument of communion with God and also of communion and reconciliation of men with one another. The message of the Church, as described in the Second Vatican Council, is Trinitarian and Christocentric.<sup>52</sup>

In the wake of the Extraordinary Synod, Walter Kasper examined the concept of the church as sacrament in a way that stressed its limitations as much as its positive importance. He described how the evolution of the concept from the German Schema through the following drafts of *Lumen gentium* involved a series of difficulties and modifications.<sup>53</sup> The word *veluti* (“as if it were”) now qualifies the term sacrament. Kasper emphasized that the church as sacrament is one concept among others, that in the Vatican II texts it is always embedded in a christological context, and that the term “sacrament” is not applied to the church in a proper sense.<sup>54</sup>

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51. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, trans. Salvator Attanasio and Graham Harrison (1985; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985) 47.

52. The Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod, II, A, 2. [First reference: need full bibliography, how about <http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/SYNFINAL.HTM?>]

53. Kasper, *Theology and Church* 114.

54. Ibid. 115–17.

John Paul II, in his 1988 postsynodal apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici*, when explaining the concept of the church as a communion explicitly ranks the Body of Christ image over the image of the people of God and that of the church as sacrament:

*Above all*, there is the image of the *Body* as set forth by the Apostle Paul. Its doctrine finds a pleasing expression once again in various passages of the Council's documents. *In its turn*, the Council has looked again at the entire history of salvation and has reposed the image of the Church as the *People of God*: "It has pleased God to make people holy and to save them, not merely as individuals without any mutual bonds, but by making them into a single people, a people which acknowledges him in truth and serves him in holiness." From its opening lines, the Constitution *Lumen gentium* summarizes this doctrine in a wonderful way: "The Church in Christ is a kind of sacrament, that is, a sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of all the human race" (no. 19, emphases added).<sup>55</sup>

John Paul clarifies further that to understand properly the church as a communion, and thereby to put the Body of Christ first and to clarify that the Christian people of God is "messianic," is to avoid understanding the church in merely sociological or psychological terms.

The opening paragraph of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Communio in notio* (1992) lamented:

Some approaches to ecclesiology suffer from a clearly inadequate awareness of the church as a *mystery of communion*, especially insofar as they have not sufficiently

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55. John Paul II, *Christifideles laici*,

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_30121988\\_christifideles-laici\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici_en.html).

integrated the concept of *communion* with the concepts of *People of God* and of the *Body of Christ*, and have not given due importance to the relationship between the church as *communion* and the church as *sacrament*.<sup>56</sup>

The document's explanation of these points can be taken as saying that the church as *sacrament* is to be read in the light of the church as *communion* (see *ibid.* nos. 3 and 4).

On the one hand, Semmelroth wanted to "supplement" the Mystical Body of Christ image as expressed in *Mystici Corporis* and in the 1962 draft of *De ecclesia*. He favored thinking of the concept of the church as a sacrament not just as one image among others but as an organizing principle that expressed a supernatural ontology that transcended and permeated all other concepts of the church. He wanted a lay-inclusive, more humble, self-critical church and envisioned that in future councils it could be so. He argued that

it is important for the correct faith understanding of the church to observe that the forever unsurpassable church founded by Christ is still rooted in history and that in its desert journey through history it is always searching for the eternal city as its ultimate goal. . . .

All too little have believers learned to reckon with inevitable changes in the church.<sup>57</sup>

On the other hand, Semmelroth clearly maintained an explicitly christological focus in his explorations of the meaning of the church as sacrament. Much of the criticism from conservative theologians after the council was leveled at progressives such as Karl Rahner and Edward

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56. CDF, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholics Church on Some Aspects of the Church

Understood as Communion,"

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_2805\\_1992\\_communionis-notio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_2805_1992_communionis-notio_en.html).

57. Semmelroth, "Die Kirche: Das neue Gottesvolk" 375.

Schillebeeckx.<sup>58</sup> Both of these theologians interpreted the church as sacrament more specifically as *sacramentum mundi*, the sacrament of the world. Rahner connected *sacramentum mundi* with his concept of anonymous Christianity, describing the church as a kind of vanguard that makes explicit what is already happening implicitly and less adequately in all human experience outside the church.<sup>59</sup> Schillebeeckx used the term *sacramentum mundi* in a way that caused the centrist Henri de Lubac to wonder whether Schillebeeckx was reducing the meaning of the church as sacrament to a tool for moving beyond explicit religiousness in support of political, revolutionary causes.<sup>60</sup>

It is likely that Rahner, eight years Semmelroth's senior, had more influence on him than vice versa. Rahner had received the best education that Germany had to offer, whereas

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58. In the following comparison, I intend to be descriptive rather than evaluative. I am not implying negative judgments about the work of these leading theologians.

59. Karl Rahner, "The Church: Basic Sacrament of the World's Salvation," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 10, trans. David Bourke (New York: Herder & Herder, 1973) 14–24.

60. For de Lubac's critique of the immediately postconciliar work of Schillebeeckx, see Appendix B, "The 'Sacrament of the World,'" in *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, trans. Richard Arnadez (1980; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1984) 191–234. His critique cites mainly essays from volume 3 of a collection of Schillebeeckx's essays, *Approches théologiques* (Paris: C.E.P., 1967). De Lubac delivers his sharp critique in an overall tentative and respectful manner. Schillebeeckx's later works clearly develop more nuanced positions on the issues at stake here.

Semmelroth's early education had been comparatively ordinary.<sup>61</sup> Both Rahner and Semmelroth are often described as being humble and gracious, but only Semmelroth is said to have been rather quiet (though also very humorous). His *Die Kirche als Ursakrament* (1953) cites an unpublished manuscript by Rahner as one of his sources, mentioning in particular the early Rahnerian concept of the church as "root-sacrament" (*Wurzelsakrament*).<sup>62</sup> It appears quite possible that some of Semmelroth's core concepts were developed in conversation with Rahner, and most of what Semmelroth wrote is theologically compatible with what can today be called "Rahnerian." Both of these Jesuits were pastoral theologians whose work always reflected concern for the church. They worked closely together throughout the years of the council, and even roomed together in Rome when the council was in session. My own extensive reading of these two authors leads me to doubt that they seriously disagreed over any major issue.

Semmelroth's own writings were deep, consistent, and forward-looking. When the image of church as sacrament came to the forefront in 1962, he became the man of the hour. His commentaries on *Lumen gentium* give evidence both of how much he contributed, learned, and

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61. Peter Hünemann made this point to me in a conversation at a symposium in Boston on "The Legacy of Vatican II," September 26, 2013.

62. Semmelroth, *Die Kirche als Ursakrament* 45 n. 35. Endnote 35 appears on p. 238 and reads: "Sacramentum radicale. K. Rahner S.J., De paenitentia tractatus historico-dogmaticus. Innsbruck 1952 (als Manuskript vervielfältigt). 411." The 1963 German edition of *Die Kirche als Ursakrament* cites as the same [Ders.], "Die Leidenschaft in der Kirche nach der Lehre der Enzyklika Pius XII, 'Mystici Corporis,'" *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. 2 (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1955) 80. The latter article first appeared in *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 69 (1947) 129–88.

grew at the council. Rahner, though, was more philosophically sophisticated and theologically systematic. He addressed a wider range of issues in a groundbreaking manner. He was no public controversialist; perhaps quite the opposite. Compared to Semmelroth, however, Rahner was more inclined to push the envelope regarding the need for change in church thinking and practice. Semmelroth, whose poor health was a concern, seems to have slowed down after the council, whereas Rahner was at that time still moving vigorously ahead.

Somewhat in contrast with Rahner, or perhaps more in contrast with how Rahner came to be perceived, Semmelroth's own way of connecting the church as sacrament with the world remained focused on the encounter with God by Christians empowered by their baptism and confirmation. The point of his lifelong campaign to "supplement and integrate" various images of the church within the organizing vision of the "church as sacrament" was to clarify the connection between all Christian reality and Christ's saving work. In other words, Semmelroth wanted to dethrone the Mystical Body of Christ not in order to lose its christological focus but to enhance it. For Semmelroth, all states of life in the church are ways of living out the call to holiness, of making visible the gift of God's grace given through Christ.

Semmelroth spoke of the actual experience of the work of the Holy Spirit at the council. He mentioned specifically how at the start of the first session, against desolate expectations, a sudden, unforeseen new beginning was given to the work of the Council. He also recalled how, at the end of the third session, many were shocked by the sudden working of God beyond human ways, bringing about a renewed optimism:

That a divine power was working through the church during the council showed itself above all in that an extraordinary variety of outlooks and proposals as well as an effort toward an active decentralization in many areas in no way made impossible the unity of

the Catholic faith in the one church; on the contrary, the hard-to-reconcile diversity of outlooks and proposals never put in question the unity of the faith and the indefectibility of the elements of the church founded by Christ.<sup>63</sup>

The Holy Spirit, Semmelroth believed, was working at the council to perfectly blend continuity and change both in ecclesiology and in the life of the church itself. The experience of the last 50 years, however, suggests that the Holy Spirit established this perfect blend as a kind of ideal, eschatological presence made visible within the historical church that is still wandering through the desert of significant, sometimes polarized tensions in its ongoing search for the eternal city.

### **Author biography**

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63. Semmelroth, "Die Selbstdarstellung der Kirche" 62 (my translation).