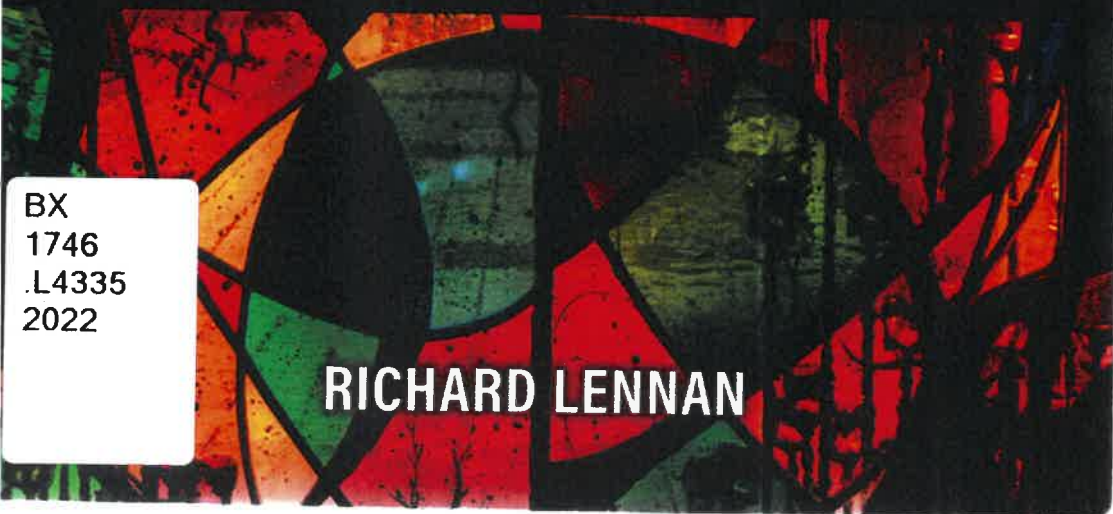




TILLING THE CHURCH

Theology for an Unfinished Project



BX
1746
.L4335
2022

RICHARD LENNAN

Tilling the Church

Theology for an Unfinished Project

Richard Lennan



LITURGICAL PRESS
ACADEMIC

Collegeville, Minnesota
www.litpress.org

Cover design by John Vineyard. Image courtesy of Tim Vineyard. Used with permission.

Scripture quotations are from New Revised Standard Version Bible © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Excerpts from documents of the Second Vatican Council are from *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations; The Basic Sixteen Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery, OP, © 1996. Used with permission of Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota.

© 2022 by Richard Lennan

Published by Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever, except brief quotations in reviews, without written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, PO Box 7500, Collegeville, MN 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lennan, Richard, author.

Title: Tilling the church : theology for an unfinished project / Richard Lennan.

Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press Academic, [2022] |

Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "Tilling the Church explores the possibilities for a more faithful, just, and creative church, one responsive to the movement of grace. Fruitful engagement with grace requires the church's conversion, the ongoing formation of a community whose words and actions reflect the hope that grace engenders"— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021049096 (print) | LCCN 2021049097 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780814667439 (paperback) | ISBN 9780814667446 (epub) |

ISBN 9780814667446 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Church. | Catholic Church—Doctrines. | Grace (Theology)

Classification: LCC BX1746 .L4335 2022 (print) | LCC BX1746 (ebook) |

DDC 262/.02—dc23/eng/20220105

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021049096>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021049097>

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	xi
1. The Church as Project	1
2. Symbolizing Grace	39
3. The Pilgrim Community of Faith and Hope	81
4. Engaging the Graced World	123
5. The Future-Oriented Past	163
6. The Art of Faithfulness	207
Conclusion	251
Index	257

Introduction

“Tilling,” writes Pope Francis, “refers to cultivating, plowing or working.”¹ In *Laudato Si’* (LS), his encyclical promoting care for the earth, humanity’s “common home,” the pope includes tilling among the activities that nurture the earth. The document describes the natural world as “a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity,” a status that establishes the physical environment as “the responsibility of everyone” (LS 95). Tilling the earth models human behavior that reverences rather than ravages this patrimony. As with the effort to nurture a vineyard (Isa 5:1-10) or stimulate the fertility of a fruitless fig tree (Luke 13:6-9), tilling fosters the earth’s potential for future bounty by supporting existing growth, attending to present needs, and redressing what neglect or misuse has wrought. Tilling, then, expands the likelihood that coming generations will receive their patrimony in a robust condition.

Against the backdrop of human-driven climate change that imperils the earth, Pope Francis supports efforts “to restore the various levels of ecological equilibrium, establishing harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God” (LS 210). To achieve this equilibrium, *Laudato Si’* advocates for “integral ecology.” This category weaves together God, humanity, and the physical environment, underscoring that humanity’s right relationship with

1. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* (LS), On Care for Our Common Home (2015), 67, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html. For analysis of *Laudato Si’* and its reception, see Michele Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism: Relevance and Renewal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 51–65.

God is inseparable from a right relationship with all that God creates, sustains, and fulfills.² Integral ecology, since it seeks to reflect God's desires for the whole of creation, extends its attention to political culture and social structures, both of which affect the human as well as the physical environment. From the perspective of integral ecology, the commitment to protect air and water against pollution requires not only support for low-impact manufacturing processes, but resistance to the siting of factories close to residential areas in which vulnerable human populations live. Integral ecology, then, champions policies that serve justice and equity in housing, health, and other social programs, as well as in access to natural resources and renewable energy.³

Consistent with his vision for integral ecology, Pope Francis depicts the retrieval of ecological equilibrium as critical for the health of humanity's relationship with the creator God, no less than for the future of life on earth. The pope presents humanity's efforts to live harmoniously with nature and pursue social and economic justice as furthering "a spirituality of that global solidarity that flows from the mystery of the Trinity" (LS 240). *Laudato Si'* develops the spiritual dimension of ecology by arguing that the repair of environmental damage requires the conversion of human hearts and minds beyond a narrow framing of self-interest. Pragmatic decisions alone will not ensure the healthy continuation of life on earth.

Conversion is both an ongoing process and a multidimensional one. Its numerous facets include the disposition to "look at ourselves, to acknowledge our deep dissatisfaction and to embark on new paths to authentic freedom" (LS 205). These actions give shape to humanity's "God-given ability to respond to [God's] grace at work deep in our hearts" (LS 205). The pope's analysis of conversion locates it as the doorway to a more authentic human existence. This authenticity requires human participation, but, to anticipate a principal theme of this volume, it also depends on grace.

2. Chapter 4 of *Laudato Si'* develops the notion of "integral ecology."

3. For a fuller discussion of integral ecology, see Daniel Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation: Salvation and Political Ecology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2019), 38–63.

Grace, God's self-bestowal, gives life to humanity and to all of God's creatures. Far from being a "thing" or even quantifiable, grace is the self-expression of the God who is other than "a static, distant, non-interactive God."⁴ As God's self-bestowal, grace is relational: without suppressing the uniqueness of God's creatures, including the complexity and inconsistency of humanity, grace draws respondents into a deeper communion with God and God's creation. A corollary of the relationship with God that grace initiates is the human vocation to safeguard creation through "disinterested concern for others, and the rejection of every form of self-centeredness and self-absorption" (LS 208). Together with "keeping," which involves "caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving" (LS 67), tilling enacts humanity's role as a graced curator of God's graced creation.

The grace of God has "an incarnational tendency," which establishes grace as "not merely the principle of a merely transcendental 'interiority,'" but as what comes "right down into [humanity's] concrete, tangible daily life, where it receives its 'expression' and takes on corporality."⁵ This "corporality" applies to creation, to the gift of God's self-offering in Jesus Christ, and, so this book will stress, to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church. It is "the witness to that divine self-giving in Scripture and tradition [and] in individuals who freely accept in faith this divine offer of salvation," that is an enduring resource for the ecclesial community.⁶

A core principle for this book is that the centrality of grace does not diminish the humanity of the church. As discouraging and disappointing as policies and practices, as well individuals and communities, in the church can be, these realities are not damning evidence of a lack of relationship between grace and the ecclesial community. They are, on the other hand, sure signs of the church's need for tilling, for the conversion that advances greater transparency to grace.

4. Cynthia Rigby, "Knowing Our Limits and Laughing with Joy: Theology in Service to the Church Invisible," in *Theology in Service to the Church: Global and Ecumenical Perspectives*, ed. Alan Hugh Cole (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 107.

5. Karl Rahner, "Personal and Sacramental Piety," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 2, trans. K-H. Kruger (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 119–20.

6. Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 42.

This book applies to the Catholic Church the rationale, imperative, and dynamics of tilling the earth. It locates tilling as an aspect of the integral ecology that applies to the church. The church's self-understanding provides a foundation for this application. More specifically, the image of the church as "the seed and the beginning of [God's] kingdom," a metaphor that the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) employed to describe the ecclesial community, endorses the need for attention to all that might nurture or impede the well-being of the church and its mission.⁷ Hence, the opening to "tilling."

In establishing that the church, like the earth, exists through God's initiative, the image of the "seed" suggests that the ecclesial community can be faithful to its origin only by continuing to grow. This book employs "tilling the church" as a shorthand formula for all that contributes to the church's authenticity and serves its growth. Faithful tilling, which can take shape as innovation, reform, or support for existing expressions of the church's life, serves the future of the ecclesial community.

Preeminent in the process of tilling are the elements that further conversion: learning from both earlier accomplishments and past failures; nourishing present signs of life; and embracing openness to the possibilities likely to emerge in the unknowable future. These actions all express a response to God's call. All are likewise integral to the discipleship that embodies the church's faithfulness in its engagement with the wider world. The elements of conversion make plain that growth for the church implies something other than gaining more members or attracting the acclaim of the wider world.

A thesis flowing through this book is that the faithfulness of the ecclesial community is a graced, free response to grace, to God's continual self-offering. Faithfulness is not an outcome programmed into the DNA of the church's members, such that "choice" and "decision" would be meaningless categories within the church. The interweaving of grace and humanity generates the depths and complexity of the church. The same interweaving both frustrates all efforts at a definitive

7. The Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (LG), Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (1964), 5. Unless otherwise acknowledged, quotations from the council's texts come from Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations; The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).

appraisal of the ecclesial community and subverts every plan to achieve a specific future for the church.

To respond to grace constructively, the community of the church must accept its need for conversion. Conversion moves the ecclesial community away from those aspects of its own life that contradict the God whose call to the church is constant, unchanging, and accessible even in the ceaselessly fluid circumstances of human history. Only through the church's conversion is it possible for grace to permeate and flavor every aspect of ecclesial life, all forms of the church's relationship with God, other people, and the whole of God's creation. Until the fulfillment of God's reign, then, "tilling the church" remains a critical task, a means to unsettle complacency and break open the potential for growth.

As fruitful as the image of tilling the seed of God's kingdom might be, the appropriation to the church of language proper to an agricultural process is not without its dangers, especially if it spirals downwards into a morass of increasingly awkward metaphors related to farming. Alert to that possibility—and anxious to avoid it—this volume employs "tilling" principally as a synonym for the panoply of grace-inspired actions that further the health of the church. Nowhere in its pages, then, will the book suggest that the ecclesial community designate a specific group of its members as "tillers," nor will it nominate a class of ecclesial activities that are expressly classifiable as "tilling." Rather, the book proposes that grace, which permeates the church and the wider world, works for the health of the community's life and witness through a myriad of agents and means, including those bearing no explicitly religious label.

In a way that parallels the embrace of integral ecology by *Laudato Si'*, the book considers "health" for the church as requiring attention to more than any single feature of ecclesial life.⁸ For the church to reflect the trinitarian God who sustains it, ecclesial health requires that all aspects of the church's life exhibit the *perichoresis*, the dance-like connections and interrelationships characteristic of the Trinity.

8. From a different perspective than this volume's, Judith Gruber also identifies ecclesiological applications for *Laudato Si'* in "Ec(o)clesiology: Ecology as Ecclesiology in *Laudato Si'*," *Theological Studies* 78 (2017): 807–24.

The church's mission in the world and the internal ordering of the ecclesial community, then, must interweave and nurture each other in vibrant and creative ways that are responsive to grace. Equally, ill health or dysfunction comes about when the various elements do not coexist harmoniously, when there is a neglect of either an individual component or the balance between them. The church's principal resources—Scripture, sacramental worship and life, the faith and lived spirituality of all the community's members, and the church's ongoing encounter with the wider world—all serve the tilling that grace inspires and reinforces.

A Graced and Human Church

Grace is the vascular system of the church. As such, grace enlivens every aspect of the ecclesial community and orients the church to the fullness of life in Christ. The members of the church can neither instigate nor cancel grace, but are free to accept its call or close themselves to its summons. The fulfilment of God's life-giving grace extends beyond human history, beyond any vulnerability to human rebellion. Within history, however, human action, including its mode as inaction, can shroud the efficacy of grace, a fact that reinforces humanity's need for conversion. The relationship between grace and humanity that is the heart of the church establishes the church as "tillable," as a project in need of actions that mirror the "cultivating, plowing or working" necessary for care for the earth.

As an aid to the church's conversion toward greater transparency to grace, tilling, as noted above, entails attention to the consequences of past failings, engagement with present challenges, and cultivation of grounds for hope in the future in light of the church's orientation toward the fulfilled reign of God. This orientation signals that the church shares in "the ultimate destiny of the universe [that] is in the fullness of God" (LS 83). The conversion of the ecclesial community embodies the graced willingness to be self-critical rather than to assume that the life of the church always aligns perfectly with the prompting of grace.⁹

9. For the importance of the self-critical stance in the life of the church, see Karl Rahner, "The Function of the Church as a Critic of Society," in *Theological Investiga-*

A self-critical stance, which is a theme that will feature throughout this book, is an antidote to complacency; it fosters the ecclesial form of the “ecological equilibrium” that Pope Francis endorses. In the arena of the church, this equilibrium is the product of a balance between reception of the past, attention to present experience, and the enduring preparedness to engage with emerging possibilities for the church’s future. Efforts to accomplish ecclesial equilibrium, like their ecological equivalent, need to be continual. Equilibrium is not a once-and-for-all achievement, but a process that requires the constant rebalancing of multiple elements.

Alone, the human reality of the ecclesial community, specifically its existence in historical circumstances that are not static, would be sufficient to indicate why the balance between past, present, and future requires the ongoing attention of the community. The fact that this human reality is inseparable from grace, which is both inexhaustible and eschatological, having its fulfillment beyond history while being accessible in history, increases exponentially the need for the members of the church to understand themselves as people whose story is unfinished. All of these factors suggest that it is prudent to eschew predictions about the church’s future. Consistent with such prudence, this book will resist the temptation to become a compendium of predictions, but it will address present issues likely to influence the church’s future.

The case for tilling the church, for seeking its conversion, has a particular cogency. The earth’s generative processes, through which grace is operative, will follow their evolutionary pathways unless some disruptive external force—too often, sadly, human beings—interferes with them. Such is not the case for the church. The ecclesial community is neither the product of a biological process nor independent of human beings and their action: the church *is* human beings. At every moment of the church’s history, therefore, decisions and choices within the ecclesial community affect, for good or ill, the church’s health. The thriving of the church’s communal life and the community’s faithfulness to its mission both depend on responses to grace rather than evolution.

When human action in the physical environment displays the “self-interested pragmatism” and “the paradigm of consumerism” (LS

tions, vol. 12, trans. D. Bourke (New York: Crossroad, 1974), 229–49.

215) that ignore the God-given beauty of nature, what results is indiscriminate plundering of the earth. Ideological divisions in the church exemplify actions whose effects on the life and mission of the ecclesial community are similarly detrimental.¹⁰ These divisions can express the sinfulness that disdains commitment to the common good. Beyond rendering tilling more exigent, divisions in the church are reminders that grace, even though it suffuses humanity, invites rather than compels. What is true of human experience generally is no less true of ecclesial life: human freedom ensures that the efficacy of grace in specific circumstances eludes prediction.

The freedom of human beings to resist grace complicates discussion of the church as a graced reality. In fact, the well-chronicled history of the great and small events, past and present, that portray an “ungodly” church clouds all claims of a relationship between grace and the church. Omissions and commissions at every level of ecclesial life, the individual and institutional transgressions that contradict all that the church professes, argue against a role for the church in the revelation of God. This is perhaps especially so when it is members of the ordained hierarchy, with whom “the church” is often synonymous, who fail to reflect the life-giving God. Such failures are not merely theoretical, but all too real, as the clerical sexual abuse crisis that has blighted the Catholic Church during the last two decades illustrates tragically.

In light of the church’s inconsistent witness to God, efforts to account theologically for the church in terms of grace are prone to the suspicion that they produce idealized portraits that are incongruent with the historical record and present landscape of the church. Clearly, such concerns are pertinent for this text, in which the role of grace in the life of the church is critically important. In its endeavor to engage the conundrum that is the graced and human church, the church that is holy and sinful, this volume devotes a great deal of space to the relationship between grace and humanity.

10. For the source, impact, and possible resolution of ideological divisions in the contemporary church in the United States, see Michael Peppard, “Can the Church Transcend a Polarized Culture?” in *Polarization in the US Catholic Church: Naming the Wounds, Beginning to Heal*, ed. Mary Ellen Konieczny, Charles Camosy, and Tricia Bruce (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), 145–57.

In exploring that relationship, the chapters of this book bring to the fore the many ways in which the interweaving of grace and humanity amplifies the church's reality as neither complete nor failure-proof, but as tillable and in need of tilling. Grace, then, does not license presumption, smugness, or mediocrity in the Christian community. Even as the church remains a community in need of conversion, the presence of the Holy Spirit within the community of faith makes it possible for members to experience, and share, the "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal 5:22-23) that flow from the Spirit. That both emphases can be true simultaneously points to the uniqueness of the interweaving of grace and humanity that is the church.

The incarnational proclivity of grace, which was noted above, ensures that the church is not separable from the vicissitudes endemic to human history. Even more, it ensures that the church, as a graced human community not an angelic one, will experience its own vicissitudes that will stamp it as other than a model of unimpeachable perfection or imperturbable stillness. The incarnational dynamics of grace indicate that accurate portrayals of the connection between grace and the church need exclude only one-dimensional interpretations of the church, irrespective of whether that one dimension is proper to God alone or humanity alone.

The grace at work in the church is the same grace at work in the wider world, the world that is the setting for the church. Grace does not generate an ethereal and ahistorical ecclesial community, but situates the church within the "joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time," as Vatican II famously declared at the start of *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Since the graced mission of the church is to be "a sign and instrument . . . of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race," the ecclesial community must involve itself in the world (LG 1). This immersion can be fertile if members of the church are open to learn from the civic societies to which the church belongs, and to participate in them sympathetically and with a critically constructive spirit. The preparedness to do so is an acknowledgment that grace transcends the church even as it constitutes the church.

The fact that the ecclesial community neither controls grace nor is always responsive to grace highlights further the church's need for conversion, for which the Holy Spirit is the catalyst. The profile of the Spirit as "the element of dynamic unrest if not of revolutionary upheaval" in the church makes plain that grace is far from being anemic.¹¹ The tilling necessary to facilitate a more faithful church will differ significantly, then, from both a genteel activity in a domestic garden and a fleeting sentiment that does not translate into action. Indeed, the tilling of the church can require the resolve to confront the "hypocrisy" of those members "not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel" (Gal 2:11-14).

Conflict in the church, even when it furthers the conversion that results in greater faithfulness to the mission of the ecclesial community rather than in division, is always a source of tension and discomfort for those it touches. As challenging as it can be to navigate conflict in helpful ways, the ripples it produces are not necessarily harbingers of schism in the church: "When we are united in faith in Christ and the Church and in mutual love, we do not need to demonstrate to the world that we are also united in everything. A lack of unity can be a symbol of real life and the way to avoid stagnation and the peace of the graveyard, it can be the way new tasks and solutions are sought and found."¹²

Paradoxically, the Spirit who can be the source of unrest also cultivates unity and the "bond of peace" (Eph 4:3) in the ecclesial community. The Spirit also stimulates both the convergences between the church's past, present, and future and the corrective influences that each period can exert on the others. Since traces of the Spirit are evident in both unrest and unity, discerning the movement of the Spirit, rather than co-opting the Spirit for one's preferred option, is clearly critical for the health of the church.

The fact that the church can undergo conversion without ceasing to exist, and can look to the future without obliterating its past and present, indicates the church's Spirit-driven potential for imagina-

11. Karl Rahner, *Nature and Grace*, trans. D. Wharton (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 79.

12. Karl Rahner, *Kritisches Wort: Aktuelle Probleme in Kirche und Welt* (Freiburg: Herder, 1970), 54; my translation.

tion and creativity. This text will stress that imagination and creativity are not merely permissible in the church, but are integral to all that establishes the church's specificity. As such, those qualities, too, are instruments of grace that are no less essential to tilling the ecclesial community than is the acknowledgment of failings and the commitment to learn from those failings. Both learning from the past and openness to the future, then, illustrate that the church's foundations continue to foster the life of the ecclesial community.

"Foundations" refers commonly to decisions and actions that occur at the dawn of an institution or group. It is by no means exceptional for all that emerges in the founding period to govern every aspect of the group's life, including whether the endorsement of change and new directions for the future is acceptable. Unlike the constitution of states or the charters of companies, the church's foundations are both personal and present. The church's primary foundation, and the source of all potential, is its graced relationship to God, in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit: "The things that maintain the Church today in its being the Church of God are precisely the same christological and pneumatological realities which gave it origin."¹³ The grace that animates the church is not a relic of the past, nor a vague memory, but fuel for the imagination of the ecclesial community in every age.

The conviction that the grace of the Spirit stimulates movement in the church is at odds with the view that the ecclesial community's foundations, packaged regularly as "tradition," sanctify only what comes from the past. This perception of tradition can frame the past as sacrosanct, thereby limiting acceptance of anything new. With this tension in mind, a key task of this book is to examine the relationship between the church's foundations and the creative reception of the past in light of the influences on the present. Grace is not fickle, moving one way today and another tomorrow, nor is each generation in the church more insightful or faithful than its predecessors. Yet, the limitlessness of grace—"the newness which God himself mysteriously brings

13. Pedro Rodriguez, "Theological Method for Ecclesiology," in *The Gift of the Church: A Textbook on Ecclesiology*, ed. Peter Phan (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2000), 139–40.

about and inspires, provokes, guides and accompanies in a thousand ways¹⁴—and the constantly changing world in which members of the church seek to express their faith both enable and evoke creativity within the ecclesial community.

Since grace is the church’s abiding foundation, construing the church’s future must differ from both a comprehensive repudiation of the church’s past, as cloaked as that past inevitably is with the ambiguity inseparable from humanity’s response to grace, and an equally doctrinaire refusal to take up new questions. The space between those two extremes is expansive, even if not always well-delineated. This indicates that one element of ecclesial imagination, for communities no less than individuals, is the ability to recognize the movement of grace in what has come from the past, vivifies the present, and draws the church toward the future.

In relation to horticulture and agriculture, tilling requires appropriate tools for specific tasks. Less obviously, but no less essentially, it requires the ability to “read” the soil, to recognize its needs and strategize on responses likely to be effective in meeting those needs. These conditions apply equally, *mutatis mutandis*, to the tilling of the church. Thus, the Second Vatican Council emphasized that the effectiveness of the church’s mission in the world was inseparable from “the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (GS 4).

For the members of the church, this “reading” can be a synonym for discerning the presence of the Spirit, of grace. Since the church’s historical context and the life of the Christian community in every age manifest unique “signs of the times,” an alertness to those signs and the facility to interpret them “in the light of the Gospel” are components of the tilling that forms the church for its ongoing mission. Significantly, this facility, as a gift of grace, is proper to all the members of the ecclesial community, requiring that all references to “the church” affirm the inclusive reach of the Spirit’s gifts—an emphasis that will recur through this volume.

14. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World (2013), 12, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

A thoroughgoing theology of the church, one attentive to the vast array of “signs of the times,” requires awareness of all that affects ecclesial life in the manifold settings in which the members of the Catholic community live. Contemporary ecclesiology reinforces this conviction, especially in its sensitivity to particular expressions of ecclesial faith and, its corollary, an appreciation of the role that “locality” plays in ecclesial life.¹⁵ Both emphases are compatible with imagining a range of possibilities for the future of different communities within the one church, especially when those possibilities are consistent with the church’s own resources.

Current thinking about the church is less hospitable to any approaches suggesting that the life of the church should follow a single pattern applicable everywhere. The reluctance to endorse a hegemonic model increases if that model offers little connection to the unique circumstances of different groups in the church—“After all, if [descriptions of the church] are not true of anyone in the Church, what can it mean to say they are true of the Church?”¹⁶ The imperative to do justice to particular experiences of ecclesial life is most evident in the burgeoning expressions of “global Catholicism,” which acknowledge that diversity in Catholic life is a present reality, not simply a theoretical possibility.¹⁷

Alert to this trend and to the diversity of the church’s contexts, it is important to state that the present work has its roots principally in the issues and literature that arise in the contemporary ecclesial context of North America, Europe, and Australia. Issues prominent in those settings include not only the church’s engagement with pluralistic societies, but possibilities for the ecclesial leadership of women, and for more collaborative and coresponsible forms of ecclesial life, especially in light of the revelations of clerical sexual abuse. These topics might not feature currently in the same way for every ecclesial community

15. See, for example, Pascal Bazzell, “Towards an Empirical-ideal Ecclesiology: On the Dynamic Relation between Ecclesiality and Locality,” *Ecclesiology* 11 (2015): 219–35.

16. Joseph Komonchak, *Who Are the Church?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2008), 10.

17. For an example of theologies reflecting the insights of “global Catholicism,” see Jane Linahan and Cyril Orji, eds., *All the End of the Earth”: Challenges and Celebration of Global Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2020).

throughout the world, but they do have implications that transcend a single culture. It is likely, too, that ongoing discernment of these issues will be significant beyond the present moment of the church's history, contributing to shaping the church into the future.

Expressions of faith and practice that become part of "the universal church" tend to have a local source from which they spread, rather than emerging throughout the entire church at the same time or being the result of a mandate from "the center." In addition, members of the church, in every setting, share the struggles and challenges intrinsic to the building of community. Creative participation in this task requires responsiveness to the grace at work through the proclamation of the word and the church's sacramental life, and to the call to discipleship in the world. Since this challenge is common to members of the ecclesial community throughout the world, ecclesial life in one context will be relevant to its form in all contexts.

As this book develops "tilling" as its primary frame for reflecting on the ecclesial community and clarifying its mission, the relationship between grace and humanity will be its lodestar. The specifics of ecclesial life in every setting—past, present, and future—reflect the particular interweaving of grace and humanity that gives the church its unique identity. To begin the exploration of the relationship between grace and humanity in the life of the church, the first chapter will explore "the church" to establish that being tillable, being incomplete and in need of attention, is essential to all that the term encompasses.



The Church as Project

Henry Ford's assembly line disrupted the history of manufacturing. By enabling the high-volume, time-efficient, and cost-effective production of reliable cars, Ford launched a new era in the supply of consumer goods. The assembly line was similarly revolutionary in its impact on human labor. To ensure that his system maintained maximum efficiency, Ford limited workers to the repetition of discrete actions, making it impossible for them to exercise initiative or vary their routines. Ford envisaged personnel in his factories as components of a machine, so he would not allow them "to talk, hum, whistle, sit, lean, pause for reflection, or otherwise behave in a nonrobotic fashion while working, and [they] were given just one thirty-minute break per shift in which to go to the lavatory, have lunch, or attend to any other personal needs."¹ Ironically, then, the assembly line, a monument to humanity's technical and aesthetic imagination, achieved its goals by stifling human freedom and spontaneity.

So intent was Ford on protecting the manufacturing process against the vagaries of human behavior, he insisted that even the pedagogy of the "English School," a facility that his company provided for its employees, should serve this purpose. To satisfy the carmaker's stipulation,

1. Bill Bryson, *One Summer: America, 1927* (New York: Doubleday, 2013), 235.



Symbolizing Grace

Freedom is essential for the flourishing of individual and communal relationships. Without freedom, the self-sacrifice that all relationships require becomes an imposition rather than a gift. The absence of freedom, then, is a reliable marker of relationships in peril. So significant is freedom, it is the choices of free citizens, rather than the weight of laws and institutions, that exert a determining influence on the welfare of societies. Laws delineate acceptable from unacceptable actions, institutions endorse and guide practices likely to serve social stability, but the efficacy of these instruments depends on the decisions of free citizens to support them through their attitudes and actions. Absent this free assent, laws and institutions may even yield their place to the coercion that is the language of regimes dedicated to self-interest rather than the common good.

Communities of free citizens rarely display the orderliness of Henry Ford's mechanized system or the illusory calm that dictatorships enforce, but this does not doom them to fragmentation into a host of competing interests. A shared commitment to self-restraint and solidarity over selfishness and individualism can build social harmony, redress historical failings, moderate the disparities between "haves" and "have-nots," and resolve tensions between communal and individual rights—"Charity, with its impulse to universality, is capable of



The Pilgrim Community of Faith and Hope

Archdeacon Theophilus Grantly has a mission. Dr. Grantly, an imperious figure in the novels that begin Anthony Trollope's *Barchester* series, sets himself "to guard the citadel of the church from the most rampant of its enemies . . . and secure, if possible, the comforts of his creed for coming generations of ecclesiastical dignitaries."¹ Consistent with this resolve, the archdeacon is implacably hostile to new ideas and to even the faintest prospect of innovation in any aspect of the church's life. Equally, he opposes all social movements seeking to "improve" society, preferring that the church, from its secure place above the madding crowd, offer benign guidance to the general population. Dr. Grantly's principal interest is actually the maintenance of all that serves his personal comfort, but he styles himself a noble custodian of the church and society as God would have them, as stable, tranquil, and unadventurous.

Dr. Grantly is a caricature, a version of nineteenth-century Anglicanism that Trollope parodied to great effect. His attitudes to the church and the world might be overstated, but they are more than the stuff

1. Anthony Trollope, *The Warden* (1855; repr., Mineola, NY: Dover, 1998), 32.



Engaging the Graced World

Pentecost is central to the story of the church. Catholic teaching is clear in its conviction that “the *era of the Church* began with the ‘coming,’ that is to say with the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles gathered in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, together with Mary, the Lord’s Mother.”¹ Through their reception of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the followers of Jesus emerge as “the church,” no longer a fearful group but the community of faith whose members take up their commission to proclaim Christ in word and action, even to “the ends of the earth” (Acts 13:47). Pentecost, like God’s creative act in Genesis, “is not to be seen simply in the chronological sense of a one-off ‘beginning,’” nor does it commemorate a random gift from an ephemeral muse.² Rather, the Spirit who launches the “era of the church” remains with the ecclesial community to deepen and sustain the faith and hope that fuels the church’s engagement with the wider human community.

1. Pope John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, On the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World (1986), 25; original emphasis; http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_18051986_dominum-et-vivificantem.html.

2. Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church’s Reception of Revelation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 38.



The Future-Oriented Past

The digital age is heir to the passion for innovation that sparked the Industrial Revolution. Today, this passion animates countless “start-ups,” the “big tech” firms of Silicon Valley, and the world of “e-sports,” just as it underpinned the growth of factories and manufacturing in the machine age. To feed the insatiable appetite of consumers for “the next big thing,” entrepreneurs and engineers of hardware and software must avoid the complacency that regards past achievements as the pinnacle of possibility. Unless companies continue to imagine, design, and develop products that are faster, more versatile, and more user-friendly than anything presently available, they face the fate of the fax machine and cassette player. Without a stream of updates, today’s “leading edge” becomes tomorrow’s “superseded,” a designation fatal to market share.

Even though all innovations depend in part on existing systems, commercial pressure mandates that “forward” is the only direction that is significant for today’s technology. In society at large, on the other hand, there is a growing demand that the makers of “smart” products address concerns about the impact of such devices on personal privacy, the “digital divide” between rich and poor communities, and even national security. The tension between the two perspectives makes evident that innovation has cultural implications. Since technological development is a human reality, it does not simply affect the present



The Art of Faithfulness

Art engages with life's breadth and depth. As "a product of that human transcendental by which, as spiritual and free beings, we strive for the totality of all reality," art gives imaginative expression to what eludes humanity's definitive grasp.¹ Through creativity in music and literature, as well as human movement and various visual media, artists resist resignation to the seeming randomness of the events that punctuate history. The work of artists embodies quintessentially human qualities that include an appreciation of beauty and a sensitivity to suffering. Art also reflects humanity's quest for hope amid all that enchants, baffles, and at times overwhelms everyday life. Whether striving to express joy or protesting against injustice, artists testify to the human project of meaning-making that arises in the present but looks to the future. Interpreted theologically, these characteristics of art identify it as a graced expression of transcendence, and so as a response to humanity's encounter with the mystery of God.²

1. Karl Rahner, "Art Against the Horizon of Theology and Piety," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 23, trans. J. Donceel and H. Riley (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 165.

2. David Tracy argues that if art rejects transcendence, it can become "ersatz religion"; see David Tracy, "A Correlational Model of Practical Theology Revisited," in