Church Institutions
A Theological Note

Michael J. Himes

The author provides a theological argument for why institutions are necessary in the life of the Christian community. Through a reflection on the role of the Spirit in the life of a community as well as the historical nature of the Christian community, a theological foundation for the practice of church institutions is illustrated.

Readers have a right to know what an article is about and whether the writer is serving a particular agenda in writing it. This article is not about the institutional model of the Church. It is not about styles of institutional management. It is not about ways in which institutions relate to one another. It is about a more basic and perhaps more naive question: why do we as Christians institutionalize our ministries? Is the fact that we have constructed over the centuries institutional forms for the work of social justice and the ministry of charity merely a necessary evil flowing from the fact that we live surrounded by other institutions? Is not the spontaneous act of love and vindication of justice the real calling of the followers of Christ, not the building and maintaining of educational systems, healthcare networks and social welfare lobbies? I want to suggest a very foundational reason for thinking otherwise. But I do so as a theologian, not a sociologist or an economist or a political scientist or an anthropologist or a

Michael J. Himes is professor of theology at Boston College. The 1999 recipient of the Washington Theological Union’s Sophia Award for Theological Service to Ministry, he is the co-author of Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology, the author of Doing the Truth in Love and Ongoing Incarnation, the translator of J. S. Drey’s Brief Introduction to the Study of Theology and the co-editor of Finding God in All Things and The Legacy of the Tübingen School.
psychologist or an administrator, all of whom have very important contributions to make to the discussion.

So this article will briefly present a fundamental theological ground for institutional structures in Catholic life. There is a particular reason for writing the article: the contemporary American distrust of institutions which sometimes finds expression in a romanticized emphasis on individual initiative as opposed to formally organized action.

One of the meanings given for the word “institution” in the Oxford English Dictionary is “the giving of form or order to a thing; orderly arrangement; the established order by which a thing is regulated.” Most people would be hard pressed to take exception to giving form and order to reality. Artists, for example, are by definition those who seek to discern form or pattern in their experience. All of us who carry pocket calendars or have datebooks on our desks are engaged in the work of institutionalizing our lives by giving orderly arrangement to our days and weeks. But a more ominous note emerges in the O.E.D.’s definition of “institutional”: “lacking individuality; routine, uniform.” The adjective betrays the uneasiness which many feel about the noun: institutions are lifeless.

It is almost a commonplace of contemporary life, especially in the United States, that people are suspicious of institutions. Entrepreneurs, individuals who realize their dreams, pioneers who launch off into new territory, are widely praised and admired. “Company men,” “suits,” bureaucrats, institutional types, are regarded as unimaginative and uncreative; they may even be objects of suspicion. In American mythology, whether in politics or business, science or the arts, the individual with the dream is a hero. Frequently his opponents and critics, the people the hero has to overcome to accomplish anything, are the representatives of “the system,” the institutions of community life. It sometimes seems that institutions are what ideas become when they lose their power to inspire. Contemporary distrust of institutions was a major theme of the widely read and often cited analyses of the decline of American communal life by Robert Bellah and his colleagues, Habits of the Heart and The Good Society (Bellah et. al., 1985, 1991).

Nowhere is this distrust more apparent in contemporary American life than in religion. Pastoral ministers and college and university teachers are used to hearing many of the people with whom they deal say that they are deeply concerned about their spiritual lives but not at all interested in “organized religion.” Indeed,
On most campuses the word in a lecture title which fills classrooms is “spirituality,” and the word which empties them is “Church.” Over a quarter of a century ago, Avery Dulles observed:

In an age when all large institutions are regarded with suspicion or aversion, it is exceptionally difficult to attract people to a religion that represents itself as primarily institutional. As sociologists have noted, we are experiencing in our age the breakdown of closed societies. While people are willing to dedicate themselves to a cause or movement, they do not wish to bind themselves totally to any institution. Institutions are seen as self-serving and repressive and as needing to be kept under strong vigilance (Dulles, 49–50).

For many, it seems that the very meaning which they attach to the word “religion” is antithetical to institutionalization, since the religious is the realm of the radically personal and an institution is, for them, by definition impersonal.

The assumptions that “personal” is equivalent to “private,” an equivalence utterly unknown to the ancient or medieval world, and that “private” is interchangeable with “individual,” leading to an oxymoron such as “private citizen,” are characteristic of American life today. That all too easy equivalence is perhaps the single biggest challenge facing the Catholic tradition in its ongoing dialogue with American culture.

Individualistic Americans fear that institutions impinge on their freedom. . . . For just this reason, the classical liberal view held that institutions ought to be as far as possible neutral mechanisms for individuals to use to attain their separate ends—a view so persuasive that most Americans take it for granted, sharing with liberalism the fear that institutions that are not properly limited and neutral may be oppressive. This belief leads us to think of institutions as efficient or inefficient mechanisms, like the Department of Motor Vehicles, that we learn to use for our own purposes, or as malevolent “bureaucracies” that may crush us under their impersonal wheels (Bellah, 1991, 10).

Recognizing the depth of the individualist bias in American life and responding to its challenge to core Catholic claims about human existence are immensely important for the Church in this country (Himes and Himes). Here I will offer a few comments on one dimension of the task: the ground for institutionalization of particular dimensions of the ministry of the Church such as health care and work for social justice.

It is certainly no secret that the future of Catholic schools, hospitals, and charitable institutions is in question as the number of religious declines and financial pressures mount. Some, even among those who have devoted their lives and their talent to these institutions, find themselves questioning whether there is a need
any longer for them. There is no question that the work of charity, the struggle for social justice, the care of the sick, and the education of young people are vital dimensions of the Church’s life and mission. But might they not be better served by personal commitment than by the continuance of large-scale formal institutions? The question of the shape and structure of these institutions can and should be answered by those whose knowledge, experience and training equip them for the task in a way that I am definitely not equipped.

We can never delude ourselves that Church institutions are immune to the corruption characteristic of institutions—the substitution of the institution’s survival for the furtherance of the task it was founded to accomplish—and so must always be concerned about the need for institutional conversion. Nowhere is the notion of the *ecclesia semper reformanda* more pertinent.

Here I wish simply to offer a theological comment on the inevitability of institutionalizing dimensions of the Church’s life and the importance of such institutions in fulfilling the Church’s mission. The deep foundation for this has to do with the Incarnation of the Son and the manifestation of the Spirit.

### Community as the Locus of the Spirit

There are two accounts of the coming of the Holy Spirit to the community of believers in the New Testament, in Acts 2:1-13 and John 20:19-23. There are three points which should not go unnoticed in the familiar Pentecost story in Acts. First, as befits the occasion, the day of the Jewish feast celebrating the giving of the Mosaic covenant, the story makes very clear reference to the theophany at Sinai. The coming of God to meet the tribes of Israel’s descendents at the mountain of God is marked in Exodus 19:16ff. by storm, wind, earthquake and fire descending from heaven.

So, too, the house in Jerusalem in which the primitive Christian community of believers is assembled is shaken by a violent wind and tongues of fire descend upon those present. Clearly, Acts sees the Pentecost event as parallel to Sinai. And what happened at Sinai? Twelve tribes of former Egyptian slaves are shaped into a people, a nation, by God’s covenant union with them. Sinai is a community-forming event. So, too, is the coming of the Spirit to the primitive Christian assembly. They become one community, the Church. The Spirit’s coming results in community.

The second point which should be observed is that the Spirit descends not on individuals but on a gathering. In the nineteenth century, J. A. Möhler made this a key point in his classic discussion of the nature of the Church:

> When the time appointed by Christ for the sending down of the spirit was come, he communicated himself to the apostles and the other disciples, when
gathered together in one place, and all of “one accord,” they were longing for his coming. It was not while one here, the other there, abode in some hidden place: nay, they were expressly commanded (Acts 1.4) to wait for him, while assembled in Jerusalem. . . . If individuals were filled with power from above in such a way, that, only in so far as they constituted a unity, could they become participants of the same; and if the hallowing of the spirit took place under sensible forms; so, according to the ordinance of the Lord for all times, the union of the interior person with Christ could take effect only under outward conditions, and in communion with his disciples (Möhler, 260).

Community is not only the result of the Spirit's advent, but in some way it is its precondition.

**The Restorer of Community**

The third point in Acts 2:1-13 to be noted is that the passage contains another echo of the Hebrew Scriptures, a reference to Gen 11:1-9, the tower of Babel story. The first eleven chapters of Genesis can be read as a mythic account of the collapse from the unity which characterizes Eden to the alienated world in which we and the first readers of Genesis find ourselves. The collapse takes place in three disastrous steps (interrupted by the Noah story): the sin of Adam and Eve, the murder of Abel by Cain, and the pretensions of the builders of the tower of Babel. As a result of the first, human beings are alienated from God; the second marks the alienation of one human being from another; and the third explains how we have come to live in communities alienated from one another. The perfect peace of Paradise has become the world as we know it: human beings alienated from God and one another dwelling in mutually alienated societies.

The symbol of the division between societies is their linguistic boundaries. When the Spirit descends in Acts 2, the first result of his coming is that the divisions of language melt away. Representatives of many distinct linguistic groups gathered in Jerusalem for the feast all hear the disciples praising God in their own tongues. The first effect of the Spirit’s coming is the reversal of the last stage of the collapse in Genesis 1–11. The Spirit is the restorer of communion.

This theme is echoed in two other stories in Acts in which the Spirit's presence is manifested: Acts 8:14-17 and 19:1-7. The first is the account of Peter and John’s laying hands on the Samaritans who have accepted the gospel as a result of Philip’s preaching. This is most probably a story about the reception of the Samaritan Christians by the main community in Jerusalem. Only when the local community embraces and is embraced by the community at large, represented here by two of the Twelve commissioned by the Jerusalem church, does the Spirit descend upon it.

Acts 19:1-7 is the curious incident of Paul's encounter with a group of disciples of John the Baptist at Ephesus. They had received John’s baptism but had
not been baptized “in the name of the Lord Jesus” and had never heard of the Spirit. They receive the Spirit when Paul lays hands upon them and exhibit similar signs to those experienced by the Jerusalem community in chapter 2, e.g., speaking in tongues and prophesying. Both these stories underscore the insistence that the Spirit is present as both cause and effect of the establishment of community among persons who were previously separated from one another in some way.

The Johannine account of Jesus’ sending the Spirit also connects the Spirit with reconciliation among people. In John 20:19-23, we find the disciples assembled as they are in Acts 2, only now it is not on the feast of Pentecost fifty days after the day of the Lord’s resurrection, but the evening of that day itself. Despite the locked door, Jesus appears in their midst, greets them, and breathes on them, an echo of God’s blowing the breath of life into the first human being in Gen 2:7; this is the moment of the re-creation of the human race. Then Jesus says to the group, “Receive the Holy Spirit”; this is the moment of the Spirit’s entry into the community. But the first effect of the Spirit is that the recipients are enabled to forgive one another. The first work of the Holy Spirit is reconciliation within the community.

In both the Johannine and Acts accounts, the Spirit is manifested through the establishment of reconciled communion with one another and so with God. The locus of the Spirit is not the individual but the community. As the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (at least, in the western tradition of trinitarian theology) and is thus the Spirit of perfect communion, so the Spirit is manifested in community in the world. Consequently, although the Spirit works through individuals’ charisms, to be sure, the test of the reality of those gifts is that they build up the community (1 Cor 14:26). And always the greatest of the Spirit’s charismatic gifts is love which unites in communion (1 Cor 13:13).

The first work of the Holy Spirit is reconciliation within the community.

Encountering God in Space and Time

Perhaps nothing marks Israel’s uniqueness more than the fact that it understands itself as constituted by history, i.e. by particular events taking place in time and space. By contrast, the great cultures of the ancient Near Eastern world—Egypt and the various Mesopotamian empires—described themselves as analogues of the cosmic order. Egypt claimed to embody the divinely established pattern of the world. By contrast, Israel accounted for itself by telling a
story of God’s relationship with certain persons—the patriarchs, Moses, the judges, the kings, the prophets—whose decisions and actions constitute a history. Israel’s identity rests not on a myth of a cosmic order, but a history of concrete events.

Every pharaoh was ultimately the god Re, but Saul and David and Solomon were uniquely Saul and David and Solomon. What made the pharaohs important was that they were finally all the same, the embodiment of the timelessly reborn sun; what made Israel’s kings important was that they were all different, acting and choosing, sometimes wisely, sometimes foolishly, sometimes justly, sometimes sinfully, in circumstances that constantly changed. Egypt and Babylon were rooted in myth, but Israel’s relationship with God was through a history of particular events in space and time, not through an eternally recurring pattern of nature.

Christianity has inherited from Israel this insistence on God’s action through and with concrete historical events. It is not surprising that the early Christian Church had to struggle to distinguish its claims from Gnostic and docetic versions of the gospel. The Hellenistic world in which the first generations of Christians lived, like the ancient Near Eastern cultures that surrounded Israel, could initially make sense of the Christian story only as a timeless myth. The threat of docetism was that it transformed the Incarnation from an astonishing claim into another story about a superhuman being appearing in human guise. But the doctrine of the Incarnation is something utterly different from a timeless myth.

There are few verses in Luke’s Gospel less immediately arresting than 3:1-2: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, in the desert the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah.” But these verses make an important point: the story about to be narrated is not a timeless tale, not set in a mythic anytime and anyplace. It is an account of particular events experienced by particular people (e.g., John) living in a particular place (the desert) at a particular time (the fifteenth year of Tiberius’s reign, etc.). This is a crucial, indeed a shocking, claim. It radicalizes a central theme of the Scriptures: the importance of the particular, which means the importance of time and space.
Quite possibly the oldest Christian writing extant is the hymn quoted in Phil 2:6-11. Paul quotes the passage as one well known to his readers; obviously, therefore, it predates the letter itself, and the authentic Pauline letters are the earliest of the New Testament documents. Although Paul cites it to support his exhortation to humility, the hymn, as he quotes it, is a breathtaking statement about the Incarnation. The one who is in the form of God has emptied himself of the glory of the Godhead and taken the form of a servant, becoming human as all human beings are human (2:7). Indeed, he has become like us in all things, except sin (Heb 4:16). By becoming human as all other human beings are in all ways except sin, God has accepted the conditions of space and time within which human beings live.

**The Scandal of Particularity**

The claim of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation that God has taken on the conditions of time and space has been described as the “scandal of particularity,” and scandalous it is. For if we take the Incarnation seriously, if we believe that the second Person of the Trinity has become like us in all things except sin, then we must accept the fact that God expresses God’s self in time and space— here and now, not then and there, or at least not in the same way then and there. Some of the patristic writers were concerned to explain why the Incarnation happened when and where it did. Attempts were made to demonstrate that the establishment of the *pax Romana* under Augustus was the optimum time for God’s entry into history because the gospel could be spread most effectively when all the world was united under the rule of a single power, and that Jerusalem, being the center of the earth, was the perfect place for God’s appearance. We may find such answers quaint, but the questions remain: Why then? Why there? The answer, I think, is Why not? All times, all places would have been arbitrary. That is the nature of time and space: here, not there—now, not then. We are related to the incarnate Christ through time and space. Because the Incarnation is an event, not a myth, we can only be connected to it through history. This is why the theme of tradition has always been so important in Christianity. John U. Nef recounted a story about the great physicist Walter Heisenberg.

An account was recently given me of an episode that occurred when Heisenberg was visiting Cambridge University. The discoverer of the principle of indeterminacy is a gifted amateur pianist. One evening after dinner in hall with the fellows of a college, he was persuaded to sit down at the instrument. He played the last sonata of Beethoven, opus 111. He finished amid silence produced by the majesty of the music. “There, gentlemen,” he remarked, “you have the difference between science and art. If I had never lived, another would have discovered the principle of indeterminacy. Given the evolution of science the
discovery was inevitable. But if Beethoven had never lived, no one would have written that sonata” (Nef, 83–84).

Given enough time and resources—and brilliance—one might arrive at the uncertainty principle or deduce the Pythagorean theorem. But no one could ever deduce the Pathétique sonata; it has to be preserved and passed on by performers and printers of scores.

In this respect, the concreteness of the particular work of art is like the concreteness of an historical event. No one can deduce or intuit the battle of Marathon. Either someone who was there told someone who told someone else who wrote it down and passed it on to someone else, etc., or we simply could not know about the Persian defeat. The uncertainty principle may not require Heisenberg, but the battle of Marathon needs Herodotus.

If God has definitively stepped into time and space, then we can know of that divine act only through some spatio-temporal chain of witnesses. This is one of the deep roots of the doctrine of the Church. It is also an indication about why institutions are important.

**The Importance of Institutions**

Central to the catholic Christian vision is the insistence that God relates to us and we to God through concrete communal experience in time and space. That is why institutionalization of the various aspects of the Church’s mission is necessary. We cannot collaborate, we cannot function as a community in time and space without some institutional forms.

The shape of those institutions, the way they are administered, the distribution of authority within them and among them, the struggle to prevent them from becoming obsessed with their own continuance rather than the furtherance of the mission, all these are absolutely essential concerns. What works at one time and in one set of circumstances may be destructive in another time and place. But this is an invitation to pay greater care and attention to our ecclesial institutions, not to dismiss them or drop out of them or seek that chimera, a purely spontaneous, noninstitutional community. Even in Eden, if Adam and Eve want to meet, they have to decide on a time and place, i.e., they have to institutionalize their arrangements. The alternative is to wander the garden forever, hoping that somewhere somewhen they will bump into one another.

If the Spirit’s presence is a loving and forgiving community (and it is not, I think an accident that the third baptismal promise couples belief in the Spirit and the Church), and if God acts concretely in space and time, the ultimate statement of this being the Incarnation, then we must not look beyond the actual day-to-day action of the community but rather look through it. Our institutions can
be obstacles to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and the call of discipleship, but they need not be. All things human are ambiguous, and what can serve the greatest good can wreak the greatest harm. But that is the way of things in a world of creatures marked by sin and redeemed by grace.

References


