

Liberate, so that All in the Church may be Hand in Hand:  
a reflection paper on Francis Sullivan's *The Church We Believe In*

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In *The Church We Believe In: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic* the Jesuit theologian Francis A. Sullivan relies upon the Catholic notion of sacramentality as one way to describe the Church. Sullivan states that “the church, like the seven sacraments, is a ‘sign and instrument’ of divine grace” (10). Relying heavily on the documents of the Second Vatican Council, especially the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, Sullivan uses the model of the Church as a kind of sacrament to interpret how the Church is truly one, holy, catholic and apostolic. As a sacrament, the Church is “an effective instrument of the salvation which it signifies” (109). The first aspect of sacramentality that Sullivan attributes to the Church is that the Church must represent and proclaim in a tangible manner the salvation Christ offers the world through himself. Furthermore, “in some way it must be actively involved in the accomplishment of God’s purpose to reconcile the world to himself.” (124). This insistence that the Church must bring about that which it signifies moves Sullivan to examine how the Church can bring about salvation in a catholic, that is to say universal, manner.

To better elucidate how the Church can bring about this catholic salvation, Sullivan turns to another understanding of sacraments promulgated in the post-conciliar period. Sacraments possess both vertical and horizontal dimensions, namely they have the ability to bring the individual believer into “intimate union with God” and to bring about “the unity of the whole human race” (132). The most interesting aspect of Sullivan’s book concerns how the Church can bring about “the unity of the whole human race,” and indeed has a responsibility to do so as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

Sullivan characterizes this bringing about of unity as “integral salvation,” a term first used by official Magisterial documents in 1974. Integral salvation is the “‘totality’ of the salvation which the church seeks for humanity [and] is a further aspect of her catholicity” (133). In seeking to

bring about the universal salvation of humanity, the Church “is called upon to be a sign to the world of what a truly just society would be, and to work, with all the resources proper to it, to overcome the causes of injustice and to promote justice in the world” (emphasis mine, 133). In Sullivan’s judgment, overcoming injustice involves “the establishment of a just global society;” this society must remedy “the objectively unjust situation in which relatively few people enjoy the advantages of prosperity while the great majority of the people in the world suffer all the disadvantages of poverty” (133).

Acknowledging that his understanding of “the church as ‘sacrament of integral salvation’” is a novel description, Sullivan concentrates on explicating that this is indeed “the way the Catholic Church...has expressed its mind about the full meaning of the salvation of which the Lord intends his church to be sign and instrument” (133). In so doing, Sullivan fleshes out the meaning of the just society that the Church seeks bring about. Concerning the laity, *Lumen gentium* notes that we all should “work to see that created goods are more fittingly distributed among men, and that such goods in their way lead to general progress in human and Christian liberty” (135). The *Declaration of the Fourth Synod of Bishops* stated in 1974 that the Church has “the most profound reasons and ever-fresh incentive for generous dedication to the service of all men, especially the poor, the weak and oppressed, and for eliminating the social consequences of sin which find expression in unjust social and political structures” (142). The acknowledgement that sin is not only personal in nature, but social as well, calls for attention as the Church seeks “to save men and women...from the consequences of the sins of injustice that others commit against them” (142). The *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* also confirms Sullivan’s position in declaring that “the love which impels the church to communicate to all people a sharing in the grace of divine life also causes her, through the effective action of her members, to pursue people’s true

temporal good, help them in their needs, provide for their education and promote an integral liberation from everything that hinders the development of individuals” (148). This statement clearly indicates that for the vertical dimension of the Church as a kind of sacrament to be effective, the horizontal dimension of the “the unity of the whole human race” must be in place. Moreover, such unity relies on the “effective action” of every member of the Church to create a just society.

Since it is the mission of the Church to both signify and effect this integral salvation, Sullivan is justified in describing the Church as a “sacrament of integral salvation.” This description of the Church does not simply warrant the action of a few in bringing about a just society. Seeing the Church as “sacrament of integral salvation” serves as a clarion call to all Christians to seek the “reconciliation of people with one another through the overcoming of systems of oppression and the establishment of a just social order in the world” (150). Every Sunday when Christians recite the Nicene Creed and assent to their belief in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church they should be reminded of Christ’s call to them to make manifest the just society necessary for the “the unity of the whole human race.” Sullivan’s exposition of the catholic character of integral salvation and indeed the Church itself as “sacrament of integral salvation” is not a mere intellectual exercise, but a calling forth to the mission of Christ.

Sullivan’s description of the Church as “sacrament of integral salvation” also holds implications for not only defining a character of the Church, but in asserting who is included in the Church. Since “the love which impels the church to communicate to all people a sharing in the grace of divine life also causes her, *through the effective action of her members*, to pursue people’s true temporal good, help them in their needs, provide for their education and promote an integral liberation from everything that hinders the development of individuals,” to be part of the Church

means to partake in this effective action (emphasis mine, 148). The people of God are apostles, that is to say, Christ calls each of us to signify and make manifest the love and grace of Christ himself. Our actions of social justice are not merely acts performed out of our abundance, but are integral to conceiving of ourselves as part of the Church. An additionally and most distinct aspect resulting from Sullivan's view of the Church as "sacrament of integral salvation," is the view of social sin. We who would consider ourselves part of the Church must not only seek to bring about the just society by caring for those who are oppressed and feeding those who are hungry, but we must likewise seek to change the structures of sin which continue to keep many in a state of oppression and poverty. Those who speak with a prophetic voice and labor to fulfill the prophetic message of integral salvation make up the Church; we seek to create a just society wherein "the unity of the whole human race" can occur.

By describing the essential catholic character of the Church in terms of "a sacrament of integral salvation," Sullivan has not only drawn upon the Catholic notion of sacramentality, but has also renewed the call for social justice on ecclesiological grounds. This call is one that should be fostered among the entire Christian Church. Sullivan's *The Church We Believe In*, especially his description of the Church as "sacrament of integral salvation," provides an example of an ecclesiological model that can both edify and motivate Christian life. Those who would be in the Church should respond to Sullivan's call for integral salvation as an element of the catholic character of the Church. It is only through the collective struggle of each member of the one Church to bring about "the unity of the whole human race" that the Church as "sacrament of integral salvation" will be made manifest: "the fruitfulness of a mission is a sign of its authenticity" (155).