

Jesus used images and models to help people get a better understanding of the kingdom of God. For example, Jesus said it was like a tiny mustard seed that grows into a large tree. It was like yeast that is put into a batch of dough to make it rise. It was also like a perfect pearl that a merchant found, and upon finding it, he sold everything he owned to purchase it.

Models must be used in clusters

A single image or model, by itself can lead to a distortion of reality, just as a single blind man's view led to a distorted view of the elephant. That is why models must be used in clusters, just as Jesus used them this way to describe God's kingdom.

Scientists make extensive use of models. Take the electron. No one has ever seen an electron. Scientists simply give this name to a consistent set of events that happen in certain circumstances. They sometimes treat the electron as a wave, and sometimes, as a particle. What they can't explain by one model, they can often explain by the other.

The same is true of Catholics. They make extensive use of models to give people a better appreciation of the Church. Certain models explain certain realities about it better than do other models. The key to a better understanding of the Church is to keep all of the models in perspective.

There are six models, especially, that Catholics use to describe the Church. Each makes a unique contribution to our understanding of this complex and mysterious reality. These six models are:

- community of disciples,
- herald of the Gospel,
- community of grace,
- institution,
- basic sacrament, and
- servant.

COMMUNITY OF DISCIPLES

A religious persecution in 1980 left a large area of Guatemala without priests. Many Catholics in this area, however, continued to meet each Sunday in their churches. Describing these Sunday meetings, Fernando Bermudez writes:

"There are communities where all confess their sins together, aloud, kneeling, everyone at once, then singing a song asking God's forgiveness."

Death and Resurrection in Guatemala

After this reconciliation service, a lay leader reads a Bible passage and explains it the best he or she can. Then the leader invites the others to share what meaning the passage holds for them.

Once a month, all communities send a representative to a part of Guatemala where priests are still permitted to function. Traveling as much as eighteen hours on foot, the representatives celebrate the Mass in the name of their parish. The altar is covered with baskets of bread that is to become the Eucharist. After the Mass, the parish representatives carry the Eucharist back home to their brothers and sisters.

In time, the authorities went a step further and closed all the churches in the area. But the people refused to stop gathering. Bermudez writes:

"Native Christians have a strong sense of community. They know full well that Christ is present wherever two or more are gathered together in his name... So they said, 'If they forbid us to meet in the chapels, we shall gather under the trees of the wood or in the caves of the mountains.'"

The Church is a community of faith

The Church communities that Bermudez describes give us an insight into the Church model called the community of disciples. This model is simply that of a community of Jesus' disciples who gather in Jesus' name to witness to their faith that "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

This model recalls the very early Christian communities that are described in the Acts of the Apostles. They too were persecuted. They too were filled with the spirit of Jesus in a way seldom realized in contemporary Christian communities. They too were adjusting to a new style of worship and leadership that had to be developed to replace the style to which they had been accustomed as Jews.

A strength of this model is its openness to the Spirit, its readiness to grow, and its faith and trust in God. A weakness is that these communities tend to be too loosely structured and too timid. They tend to lack the sense of direction and leadership that Jesus intended his Church to have.

HERALD OF THE GOSPEL

The Scottish theologian William Barclay tells a beautiful story of an old African chief attending Christian services one Sunday morning. Tears came to his eyes as he watched members of the Ngoni, Senga, and Turnbuka tribes worshiping side by side.

Suddenly his mind flashed back to his boyhood, when he would watch Ngoni warriors, after a day's fighting, washing Senga and Turnbuka blood from their spears and bodies. That morning at the Eucharist the old chief understood as never before what Christianity is all about. It is God, calling all people, in and through Jesus, to put an end to all hostility and to live as one family.

The Church has a message

This story helps us understand a model of the Church that we call herald of the Gospel. The primary focus of this model is God's word. The primary mission of this model is to proclaim the good news that God calls all peoples to live in harmony as God's family. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have all been made brothers and sisters.

A strength of this model is its focus on God's word as being the source of Christian faith and life. A weakness is a tendency to focus so intensely on God's word that it leads to a biblical fundamentalism that becomes blind to tradition and neglects the sacramental dimension of the Church.

COMMUNITY OF GRACE

This model of the Church grows out of several biblical images. One is the image of the "people of God," who are called to be holy as God is holy (Leviticus 20:26). Under this image, the Church is seen as the new Israel of the new covenant (I Peter 2:9-10). Another biblical image is the vine and the branches. Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches" (John 15:5). A third image is Paul's metaphor of the Church as the body of Christ. Christ is the head of the body; his disciples are its members (Ephesians 4:15-16).

The Church is a communion of life

These biblical images stress the mutual union, concern, and dependence of Church members upon Christ and one another. They also stress the headship that Christ exercises over the entire body. He is the source of the Church's life and activity.

A strength of this model is its focus on the communion of divine life (grace) that unites members to Christ and to one another. A weakness is that this strong focus on the communion of life could eclipse the Church's obligation to reach out to those not yet a part of this graced existence.

INSTITUTION

This model goes back to that memorable day at Caesarea Philippi, when Jesus turned to Peter and said: "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church... I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Matthew 16:18-19

This is one of the most amazing passages in the New Testament. For it shows Jesus sharing his own divine

power and authority with Peter. Peter is given special power and authority in Jesus' Church. Peter's special status explains why he is always first on the list of Apostles (Luke 6:14-16). It also explains why Peter exercises a special leadership in Church matters (Acts 1:15).

The Church is hierarchical

This model of the Church stresses the fact that the Church is not a democratic society. It was instituted as a hierarchical community. Ultimate responsibility for leadership rests on those whom Jesus commissioned to shepherd the flock of his followers.

A strength of this model is its organization, high visibility, and clear identity. A weakness is its tendency to become dictatorial, bureaucratic, and clerically top heavy.

BASIC SACRAMENT

Jesus said to Philip, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). These words of Jesus explain why some theologians call him the "sacrament of God's presence." Jesus made God present in gospel times in a way that people could see, hear, and touch.

The Church makes Jesus present

Similarly, the Church is the "sacrament of Jesus' presence." It makes Jesus present in a way that we can see, hear, and touch. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). Through his Church, Jesus continues to teach, heal, and forgive people in a way that our human condition can relate to.

A strength of this model is its respect for our human condition. It recognizes that we have bodies as well as spirits. It acknowledges that we need tangible manifestations of God's presence-and tangible ways to respond to this presence. A weakness of this model is that its use of ritual can deteriorate into formality, even superstition.

SERVANT

This model is beautifully described in the opening paragraph of a pastoral letter issued by Cardinal Richard Cushing, when he was bishop of Boston. The letter reads:

"Jesus came not only to proclaim the coming of the kingdom, but also to give himself for its realization. He came to serve, to heal, to reconcile, to bind up wounds. Jesus, we may say, is in an exceptional way

the Good Samaritan. He is the one who comes along side of us in our need and in our sorrow; he extends himself for our sake. He truly dies that we might live and he ministers to us that we might be healed."

The Church is a community for others

This model stresses that the Church announces the coming of God's kingdom not only by word but also by deed. The Church searches out the lost. The Church embraces the poor. The Church champions the oppressed. In other words, just as Jesus was a "person for others," so his Church is a "community for others." It puts itself, especially, at the service of society's rejected and needy.

A strength of this model is its high priority on ministry and service to others, especially society's downtrodden. A weakness is the risk it runs in espousing causes in a secular way, rather than in a Christ-like way. This can lead it into adopting secular values and goals.

FACETS OF A DIAMOND

In summary, there are six models that we can use to deepen our appreciation of the Church. Each model is like a facet of a diamond. It is not the diamond itself, only a facet of it.

- The community of disciples model stresses that the Church is a community of faith, open to the Spirit.

Read

The Church as 1 community of disciples	Acts 2:43-47
2 herald of the Gospel	Acts 4:1-20
3 community of grace	1 Corinthians 12:12-31
4 institution	Matthew 16:13-19, 18:15-20
5 basic sacrament	John 14:8-14
6 servant	Romans 12:1-21

Reflect

- 1 Recall what a model is. Recall how Jesus used models and why he used them in clusters. Recall how scientists use models and the advantage they find in using them.
- 2 Recall the six models that Catholics use to give them a better appreciation of the mystery called the Church. Recall the stress, strength, and weakness of each model.
- 3 In what sense is a model of the Church like a facet of a diamond, and what does that mean in the practical order?
- 4 How does the Church resemble Jesus in its two dimensions, and what problem does this resemblance lead to?
- 5 What do we mean when we say that the darkness of the Church will never blot out the light in it?

- The herald of the Gospel model stresses that the Church has a message of faith for the world.
- The community of grace model stresses the union of Church members to one another and to Christ.
- The institution model stresses that the Spirit has gifted Church members in different ways.
- The basic sacrament model stresses that the Church makes Jesus present in a tangible way.
- The servant model stresses that the Church is called to be a "community for others," just as Jesus was a "man for others."

The Church is light and darkness

The Church is unlike any other community on earth. It has two dimensions: a divine one and a human one. The divine dimension is the one that we cannot see. It is the invisible life of Christ that unifies Church members into one body. The human dimension is the one that we can see. It is the community of believers. Because it is human, the Church is like anything else that is human. It is flawed.

Because the Church is flawed, it does not always show to the world the "face of Christ" as it should. Its members can fall victim to human scandals and to abuses. This means that we often see the Church as being like ourselves: weak, sinful, and struggling to become what God intended it to be. Thus the Church will always be a mixture of light and darkness. This community of believers is confident that the light will never be obscured by the darkness.

Share

1 Discuss the following:

- "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you an automobile."
BILLY SUNDAY
- "Our business is not to do something *for* the Church, but to do something *with it*."
JOHN NEWTON
- The Church is to be a "thermostat" transforming society's attitudes, not a "thermometer" recording them.
MARTIN LUTHER KING
- "Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves on the town garbage heap . . . at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. . . . That's where we should be and that's what the Church is about."
George MacLeod (slightly adapted)

- 2 Which of the six models of the Church appeals to you in a special way and why? Which appeals to you least and why?
- 3 A survey shows that 40 percent of Catholics between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine stop practicing their faith for two years or more. Seventy percent of these return to the Church. Sixty percent of those who return do so because of the positive influence of a friend, relative, or neighbor. Did you ever stop going to church for a time? Why? What brought you back?
- 4 What is one thing about the Catholic Church that you find hard to accept? How would you advise a friend to deal with this same difficulty?
- 5 What is a talent you have, and how might you use it better to further God's kingdom on earth?