The purpose of this lecture is simply to focus on some conflicts in the contemporary church from a cultural anthropological perspective. Rarely have anthropologists turned their intrusive gaze on the cultural realities of the church. Today I dare to do so. Anthropology, as Raymond Firth said, “is an inquisitive, challenging, uncomfortable discipline, questioning established positions…peering into underlying interests, if not destroying fictions and empty phrases…at least exposing them.” Let us see if I can live up to Firth’s description.

I begin by defining what I mean by myth and narrative. I will then focus on one function of myth and narrative, namely its ability to legitimize the way people act. This will be illustrated with examples from what is happening within our contemporary church. Finally, I will seek to explain why binary oppositions within myths evoke particular, ideological conflicts within the church.

First, let me define this slippery word: culture. Only those people who assume that the Church is a pure spirit can claim that it does not form a culture and cultures. It is no misty entity. Inaccurate perceptions of and defective attitudes to culture, and therefore myth analysis, have led, and continue to lead, to bad theology, as well as faulty pastoral policies and practices. Culture is a pattern of meanings encased in a network of symbols, myths, narratives and rituals, created by individuals and subdivisions, as they struggle to respond to the competitive pressures of power and limited resources in a rapidly globalizing and fragmenting world. Culture instructs its adherents about what is considered to be the correct, orderly way to feel, think, and behave. Note the emphasis on order and feeling. Culture is 90 percent feeling!

The key word I wish to concentrate on is myth. Father Louis Luzbetak was right. “The study of myth…is as difficult as it is important.” The knowledge of local mythology can “provide contact points for the transmission of...

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5 See Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians*, 17.
the Christian message [and]...myths can help locate points of conflict between the Gospel and traditional ways of thinking and behaving.” There is very little philosophical reflection on the importance of myths simply because philosophers rarely take myths seriously. Likewise contemporary theologians and historians, despite the volumes they have written, seem hesitant to ponder the importance of myths in analyzing Vatican II documents and their impact on our contemporary ecclesiastical cultures.

Myths

Myths, according to anthropologist Malinowski, are charters for social organization, that is they describe why things are the way they are and why people should continue to act in the same way. Myths are value-impregnated beliefs or stories. They are the glue that binds people together at the deepest level of their group life. They are stories that people live by and for. They claim to reveal in an imaginative and symbolic way fundamental truths about the world and human life. They are efforts to explain what usually is beyond empirical observation, and to some degree outside human experience. This is why Aristotle says myths are composed of wonders. And wonders can never be fully described. Or as that master of mythology, John Ronald Tolkien, warned us: “The significance of myth is not easily to be pinned on paper by analytical reasoning…; unless (we) are careful...(we) will kill what (we) are studying by vivisection.”

In brief, myths tell those who believe them what reality is and what it should be. The fact is that no matter how seriously we seek to deepen our grasp of the meaning of myths, they will remain somewhat emotively ambiguous and mysterious, because they attempt to articulate what cannot be fully articulated. In the words of Paul Ricoeur, myths contain a surplus of meaning, that is, myths have an inexhaustible supply of possible meanings. Myths are not falsehoods, but truths that are imaginative insights, more profound than scientific and logical analyses to those who accept them.

Myths can evoke deep emotional responses and a sense of mystery or wonder, as Aristotle writes, simply because they develop out of the very depths of human experience. The emotional quality of myths is especially evident in what I call “residual myths.” A residual myth is one with little or no daily impact on a group’s life, but at times it can surface to become a powerful operative myth. They lurk in the culture unconscious, always waiting to re-emerge. Sloban Milosevic, the Serb leader, manipulated Serbian public opinion in his incendiary speech of June 28, 1989, by invoking a residual myth of humiliation when he recalled the defeat of Serbs by Muslims in 1389. Similarly, the myths of the pre-Vatican II Church still lurk deep in the collective unconscious of the Church’s culture and are forever rising to the surface. For this reason we speak of myths as reservoirs of memory.

7 Luzbetak, Church and Cultures, 284. Luzbetak cites in agreement the assertions of Jacob Loewen. See Jacob A. Loewen, “Myth as an Aid to Missions,” Practical Anthropology 16 (1969): 185-192.
10 Aristotle, Metaphysics 982b.
Myths and History

Luzbetak writes that “a myth in the technical sense is like a parable, play, novel, or poem; even when not historical, scientific, or within the realm of human experience, it can nevertheless be a veritable treasure house of truth.”

However, myth and history do not necessarily contradict each other because each relates to facts from its own standpoint; history observes facts from the “outer physical side, myth from the inner spiritual side.”

Myths are moral commentaries on history. The example of Abraham Lincoln, tramping several miles through snow to return a few coins overcharged to a customer in his store, may or may not be historically true. However, it conveys critically important values to the American people down through the ages. However, myths can twist historical facts, as we will see.

Narratives

Myth and narrative are two sides of the one coin (see Figure 1). Myths make our lives intelligible in the past, but the retelling of these stories in light of present needs is what we call narratives. In the process the myths are enlarged, altered, or even discarded; though, it is always assumed that the myths remain unchanged. The myths legitimize the authenticity of the narratives, even though they may conflict with historical facts.

Myths: Stories that make sense of the past
Narratives: Stories that apply myths to present context

Figure 1. Myths and narratives

The aim of myths and their contemporary application through narratives is, to legitimize, as Malinowski asserts, actions. The following are examples of the ways in which narratives create new identities and in the process foundational myths are changed or revitalized.

Examples of Narrative Changes

Narratives of refounding

A narrative of refounding is a story that radically encourages people to try dramatically new ideas, new values, and new ways of being-in-the-world. Refounding is the process whereby people relive the founding mythology of a group, and are so inspired by the experience, that they imaginatively, and creatively, search for thoroughly new ways to relate to the contemporary world. Refounding goes to the roots of problems, renewal only to the symptoms. As Paul Ricoeur writes, a refounding narrative can encourage people to “try new ideas, new values, new ways of being-in-the-world,” and consequently achieve radically new identities.

For example, the narratives of the Council called for a refounding of the church, a radical cultural shift in values and behavior, not merely a superficial renewal. The council evoked a “mythical earthquake,” a movement “from commands to invitations, from laws to ideals, from definition to mystery, from threats to persuasion, from coer-

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14 Luzbetak, Church and Cultures, 266.
16 See Arbuckle, Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians, 72.
cision to conscience, from monologue to dialogue, from ruling to serving, from withdrawn to integrated.”18 Sure, the Council remained faithful to authentic tradition of the Church, but this must not hide or downplay the fact that it evoked dramatic mythic and behavioral ruptures—ruptures that called for the refounding of the church itself, not merely superficial adjustments of existing structures. As an anthropologist looking at the Council documents, I cannot stress enough the radical nature of the cultural breaks with the past. Certainly there is continuity, but to deny the enormity of these cultural ruptures is to deny the radical call to return to the founding mythology of the Church.19

What narratives now predominate in the Church? Let me highlight, as an anthropologist, several narratives that do not take this call to return to the founding mythology of the Church seriously. Though I identify different narratives, in practice they often overlap.20

**Narratives of cultural romanticism**

Narratives of cultural romanticism idealize a cultural past. For example, sometimes it is said that the Church is not a democracy—it has never been and will never be one, and so Rome can justifiably ignore the values of participative or consultative leadership. There has been what is called a myth drift. Not only is this contrary to the spirit of Vatican II, but it ignores the original practice of the Church for a significant period of history. For example, historian Leonard Swidler concludes that as late as the beginning of the twentieth century fewer than half of the world’s bishops were directly chosen by the pope.21

**Narratives of fundamentalism**

Political and/or religious fundamentalism is apt to occur in almost every society or organization as a reaction to cultural chaos. People yearn for simplistic, clear-cut identities in the midst of this confusion. There are no gray areas of uncertainty, only absolute answers. People sense that history has gone awry and their task is to restore it to “normality,” as defined by them.22

Within the Catholic Church fundamentalism is present in different forms, in reaction to the dramatic theological and cultural changes introduced by Vatican II. The residual mythology of the pre-Council Church re-surfaces in narrative form. Sects like Catholics United for the Faith (CUF) have formed to defend the church against what they call the “evils of secular humanism,” “the loss of orthodoxy,” or the “liberalizing excesses that Vatican II inspired.” Catholic fundamentalists are highly selective in what pertains to the church’s identity, insisting on accidentals, not the substance of issues, and readily ignore papal teaching on social justice. As in all orthodoxy crazes, respect for truth and human rights can sadly suffer.23

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20 For a more detailed analysis of the following narratives see Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Catholic Identity or Identities? Refounding Ministries in Chaotic Times* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 9-30.
23 In 1997 the Holy See promulgated new procedure rules called “Regulations for the Examination of Doctrines” which modified previous norms governing the investigation of theologians. However, they do not substantially change the previous rules. As canonist Ladislas Orsy writes: “for anyone educated in the sensitivities of jurisprudence, [they] do not respond, as they were intended, to the demands of the present day…They have their roots in past ages; they were not born from the vision of human dignity and the respect for honest conscience that is demanded the world over today…They are not rooted in any divine precept.” *Receiving the Council: Theological and Canonical Insights and Debates* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009), 102-03. The theologian Elizabeth Johnson had not heard that the Committee on Doctrine of the United States Bishops Conference had investigated
Narratives of disconnection

In narratives of disconnection leaders proclaim that narrative policies of their institutions are true to their founding myths, but in fact this is not the case.

For example, in 2000 John Paul II wrote that, in the conclusions of Vatican II “we find a sure compass by which to take our bearings.” That is, he insisted that the fundamental mythological theological shifts such as collegiality would be adhered to. However, narratives emanating from Roman congregations since then have commonly contradicted this statement. In 2001 Rome issued a document, *Liturgiam Authenticam*, without consultation with the episcopal chairman of ICEL, reaffirming a ban on gender-inclusive language. The document’s narrative asserts that Rome has the right to intervene in liturgical matters, but this contradicts the Council’s mythology. John Allen writes: “The document strikes at the heart of Vatican II ecclesiology by centralizing power in the curia and by insisting that local cultures adopt an essentially Roman style or worship.”

Narratives of acculturation

Narratives of acculturation are the conscious or unconscious absorption of the values and customs of another culture. For example, patriarchy is a social system in which the male gender role acts as the primary authority and power figure at the heart of all social relations. Integral to patriarchy is the assumption that men must rule and maintain female subordination. Within the Church, the insistence that exclusive or patriarchal language be still used in the liturgy is a narrative that denies the findings of contemporary Scriptural research, facts of history, and the insights of contemporary social movements for gender equality.

In pre-Pauline and Pauline Christian communities, women appear to have acted in almost identical ways to men. As Maureen Fiedler records, women preached the gospel, went on missionary journeys, and filled some leadership functions in early Christian communities. All this was to change with the Peace of Constantine (313 CE), when persecutions against Christians ceased. From then on the Church’s leadership embraced the patriarchal values and structures of contemporary Roman culture. Even some early Fathers of the church in their theologizing about the role of women in the church often uncritically absorbed the contemporary cultural views about the gender superiority of men.


25 John Paul II, *At the Beginning of the New Millennium* (St Pauls Publications, 2001), 75.
32 For example, Tertullian in the third century declared that women are dangerous to men: “You are the devil’s gateway...you are the deserter of the divine law.” Tertullian quoted by Fiedler and Rabben, “Gender Equality,” 114. Because women, according to the culture of the time, were considered in some way impure, they had to be excluded from direct involvement in liturgies. The Synod of Laodicea in the fourth century declared: “Women are not allowed to approach the altar.” Synod of Laodicea, quoted in “Gender Equality,” 115. The Synod of Paris in 829 told women not to press around the altar or touch the sacred vessels. Synod of Paris, quoted in “Gender Equality,” 116.
Narratives that silence mourning

Narratives of mourning are processes whereby losses are formally and publicly acknowledged and allowed to slip into the past. Then the future is able to be slowly, and more or less confidently, embraced with all its uncertainties, fears, and hopes. In both Old and New Testaments we see many examples of people, who once they begin to recount the story of their grief, are able to discover new hope, new visions of society, new identities.

The public mourning of grief can, however, be silenced. Tyrannical governments particularly fear the public display of grief at funerals of their victims, for it is there that the narratives of sadness can energize people to further resist tyranny. Yet unarticulated grief remains like a powder-keg waiting to be ignited into all kinds of individual and community-destroying behavior. Ovid, the first century Roman poet, well described the reality of unnamed grief, “Suppressed grief suffocates.”

Today the Church is overloaded with unarticulated grief. This is a consequence of repeated losses. Here are some of the issues that have caused, and continue to cause, so much unresolved grief: the departure of people in their thousands from the Church; the closure of parishes often without consultation; sexual abuse scandals; questionable liturgical changes; the failure of Rome and bishops to consult; witch-hunting of theologians—lack of due process in ecclesiastical trials; discouragement of responsible dissent, even their public excommunication; and the controversial criticism of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) by the Vatican. Restorationists discourage or prevent narratives of grieving. Instead they are reviving the narratives of the pre-Council Church in order to block people from creating narratives that would vibrantly relate the Council’s theology to contemporary pastoral issues.

Polarities in Myths

Controversial anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss makes two positive contributions to our understanding of myths. First, their often inherent, complementary polarities. Secondly, the ability of myths to reconcile these polarities. However, these myths very rarely spell out precisely how the reconciliation is to take place. Therefore, because people cannot live in uncertainties, they gravitate to one pole or the other, often in an ideologically rigid manner. These insights throw more light on the continuity/discontinuity debate regarding the documents of Vatican II.

In the mythology of democracy there are two complementary poles: the rights of the individual and the rights of the common good. The third quality, “fraternity,” is the balance between these two mythological poles. What “fraternity” means in practice will depend on which polar opposite is emphasized. For Americans, fraternity means that the rights of the individual are to be respected, even though the common good may suffer. Since the rights

35 Ovid, Tristia, book V. eleg.1, line 63.
36 For example, consider the dismissal of Bishop Bill Morris of the Toowoomba diocese, Australia, 2011. He has never been told the names of his accusers nor what he was formally accused of; nor has he seen the official Vatican visitor’s report. See Michael Kelly, “Rites and Wrongs,” The Tablet 266 (January 21, 2012): 4-5.
37 For example, the excommunication by Bishop Thomas Olmsted of Phoenix, U.S.A, of Sr. Margaret McBride in 2010 for having made, according to reputable moralists, a justified decision to save the life of a pregnant mother. She was accused of permitting abortion. See Tom Roberts, The Emerging Catholic Church: A Community’s Search for Itself (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 151-53.
39 See Bruce Kapferer, Legends of People: Myths of State (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 121-208; Les Carlyon, Gallipoli (Sydney: Macmillan, 2001), 122-24. In the United States historically the tension between Federalists and Republicans, so evident in the time of President Thomas Jefferson, is an example of mythological polarities. See Jon Meacham, Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power (New York: Random House, 2012), 239-41; also, the tension between the states and federal government reflects the built-in tension within the Constitution.
of the individual take precedence, the individual retains, for example, the unqualified right to own guns despite the clear, tragic consequences to the community. Not surprisingly, therefore, interest groups such as the National Rifle Association are able to wield considerable unrestrained economic and political power. Even the medical profession constitutes a powerful lobby, through its professional associations and major insurance corporations. Any attempt by governments to redress the imbalance in favor of the common good is met with strong emotional opposition. Hence, healthcare reform also, that respects the needs of the common good, has been so difficult to achieve in the United States.

The documents of Vatican II are filled with ambiguities and tensions, resulting from the reintroduction of the polar opposites of key myths within the original creation mythology. Gone are the many certainties of the pre-conciliar apologetics, constructed on the assumption that complementary theological opposites did not exist. Here are some of the mythic ambiguities contained in the documents:

The church is universal, but it is to be incarnated within local churches to reflect their diversities of culture.

The church is an institution under the leadership of the bishops who are committed to maintain order and unity, but it is also the People of God who, as pilgrims, are not concerned about rank.

The pope has full, supreme, and universal power over the church, but the bishops collegially govern their dioceses with authority that is proper to them.

These polar opposites are concretized in two often emotionally opposing theologies: the neo-Augustinian and the neo-Thomist. Mythologically, however, though the theologies are opposed to each other, “neither one can exclude its opposite.” Nowhere in the documents does the Council spell out precisely how these polar opposites are to be balanced in real life. In fact it simply could not do so. Rather, it rightly challenged all members of the church to struggle to develop a living balance between the opposites through charity, ongoing mutual respect, and dialogue. When this does not happen, however, people over-identify with one pole or the other.

Ultimately, this balance is achievable over time only if all sides are able to interiorize the vision of the church as Christ’s Mystical Body given us by St Paul: “Now Christ’s body is yourselves, each of you with a part to play in the whole” (1 Cor 12:27).

Concluding Reflections

Let me conclude with a summary and a sign of hope.

Symbols, myths, and rituals are not replaced as quickly or as easily as buildings or landscapes, or mass-produced as neatly as automobiles or toothbrushes. The uprooting of the inner framework of cultures, even when there is conscious and intellectual assent to what is happening, destroys a people’s stable sense of belonging. They are bound to experience lengthy periods of loss and confusion. The establishment of appropriate structures and power systems,
based on the revitalized founding mythology, is a long and often tortuous process. It demands patience, the ability to live in a fair degree of ambiguity until these structures are firmly and confidently in place.

But culture gives people a vital sense of belonging. When uncertainty rears its frightening head, the residual status quo of culture re-surfaces. People fall back on their tried-and-true ways of feeling and acting in order to weather the storm evoked by the fear of cultural change. As one experienced observer said: “Culture can eat strategy for lunch!” Leaders skilled in cultural change are needed to lead people sensitively through mythic changes. If leaders fail, their followers are left in more confusion. Residual power structures re-emerge stronger than ever. Often there is a short period of concessions to change by those now in power, then a growing rigidity and insistence on widespread conformity and uniformity builds frustration to breaking point. Such is the case for some countries following the revolutionary movements of the Arab Spring, Egypt, for example.

This theory helps to explain some significant conflicts that have followed Vatican II. The Council fathers did not foresee that cultures, especially a deeply embedded, long-standing, highly centralized, and authoritarian culture of the pre-conciliar Church, do not change smoothly simply because a document says they should. Many Council fathers and their successors were ill-equipped to lead cultural changes. Consequently, the residual mythology of the pre-conciliar Church rapidly re-surfaced. This is especially evident in the restorationist behavior of the Roman Curia. The pendulum has swung firmly in favor of the first parts of the polar opposites which I have described.

At the same time thousands upon thousands of lay people, priests, and members of religious congregations took the Council’s documents with intense seriousness. The mythic beliefs became deeply embedded in their lives. The residual mythology of the pre-conciliar Church no longer made theological and pastoral sense to them. They have watched with ever-deepening sadness, even despair, the poverty of hierarchical leadership that became all too common in recent decades. Hence, the conflicts I have described.

Yet, something remarkable has occurred to give us hope. The residual founding mythology of the Church itself, not the pre-conciliar mythology, has dramatically re-surfaced. Pope Francis from the moment of his election adopted a new style of leadership based on the founding mythology of the Church itself: “unlike his predecessor, no miter with gold and jewels, no ermine-trimmed cape, no made-to-measure red shoes and headwear, no magnificent throne.” And he “deliberately abstains from solemn gestures and high-flown rhetoric and speaks the language of the people.” To quote Elton John: “Francis is a miracle of humility in an era of vanity…This pope seems to want to bring the Church back to the ancient values of Christ and at the same time [bring it into] the twenty-first century.”

I believe we can speak of Francis as a “Gospel comedian.” All good comedians, such as King Lear’s Fool, and in the early days of the movies, Charlie Chaplin (and even Chaplin’s somewhat infamous comedian contemporary Fatty Arbuckle), have one thing in common. Chaplin refused to be crushed by the pomposity and arrogance of government officials. In fact, such figures were reduced to objects of fun and even pity. True comedians are able to touch the hearts of their audiences at a profoundly deep level. We just feel they understand. They are liminal people,

45 See Arbuckle, Refounding the Church, 36-66 and Catholic Identity or Identities?, 34-67.
47 I describe these people as “lamentative” Catholics. See Arbuckle, Catholic Identity or Identities?, 65.
projecting in their behavior society’s fundamental incongruities such as hope and despair, order and disorder. Yet they are able at the same time to transcend these incongruities. They deliberately create disorder in the midst of order to give the appearance of incongruity. They call us into this incongruous situation to experience its tensions and then invite us to identify the resolution of these tensions. The social status quo is not set in concrete.51

Anthropologist Mary Douglas speaks of comedians as “ritual purifiers.” She even proposes that “perhaps the joker should be classed as a kind of minor mystic,”52 because comedians invite their audiences to critique orderly structures and status in society in search of values and truths about life. Good comedians mock on behalf of humanity the behavior of those who unduly assert authority, who overly insist on rules and obedience to traditions. They do not just condemn the world of status, wealth, power, and violence, but in some way provide us with a feeling of hope. Like biblical prophets, they hold out irrepressible hope that life is not necessarily preordained toward defeat, collapse, and tragedy, that fate is conquerable.

Such is the role and attraction of Francis, a Gospel comedian! Peter Berger asserts that humor is a revelation of the transcendence, a cautious call to redemption, and for this reason “the actions of a clown take on a sacramental dignity.”53 This is what St Paul is referring to when he describes to the fractious Corinthians his own role as a clown of Christ, without social status and power: “We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise…We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute…We have become like rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day” (1 Cor 4:10, 13).

Pope Adrian VI declared in 1523 that “We know well that even in this Holy See…abominable things have happened…We intend to use all diligence to reform the Roman Curia.”54 A similar challenge now faces Francis. He must translate his symbolic gestures into wider structurally supported action at key levels of the church. An anthropologist cannot minimize the enormity of the challenges and risks. We need to be ever mindful of the anthropological axiom: when strategies hit cultures, cultures win! We cannot underestimate the built-in cultural resistances to reform within the Church. Restorationism, with its roots firmly in pre-Vatican II mythology, is very likely to go underground and remain a powerful residual mythology just waiting for the chance to re-surface once more with powerful force as it did after Vatican II.55 My hope for Francis, therefore, is this: that he has insight into the ways in which culture can aid or hinder the fulfilment of the Church’s mission, and that he possesses the intervention skills to make desired changes happen in the structures of the church.56

51 These insights are more fully explained in my book: Laughing with God: Humor, Culture, and Transformation (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 52-55 and passim.
55 Pope Francis is firmly against restorationism: “If the Christian is a restorationist, a legalist, if he (sic) wants everything clear and safe, then he will find nothing…Those who today always look for disciplinarian solutions, those who long for an exaggerated doctrinal ‘security,’ those who stubbornly try to recover a past that no longer exists—they have a static and inward-directed view of things.” See “A Big Heart Open to God: The Exclusive Interview with Pope Francis,” America (September 30, 2013), accessed October 1, 2013, http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview.