

Walter Kasper. *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality and Mission*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015. xiv + 463 pp. \$54.00 Paperback. ISBN: 9781441187093.

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This book is the English translation of Kasper's major work on ecclesiology, originally published in German in 2011 (*Katholische Kirche: Wesen, Wirklichkeit, Sendung*, Herder). In *The Catholic Church*, Kasper addresses the main topics in ecclesiology, and he relates each topic to the ongoing ecumenical conversation, in which he participated as president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. He asserts that this book "seeks to expound the question of the Church in light of the question of God and of the message of the kingdom, and to do so in such a way that the Church is properly situated both biblically and existentially" (37).

Kasper begins his study of the church with a personal retrospective, claiming that ecclesiology always involves an element of personal testimony. Of particular significance for his perspective on the church is his background as a student and later a professor at the University of Tübingen. He professes a commitment to the ecclesiological vision of the Tübingen school, particularly as expressed in the work of Johann Sebastian Drey and Johann Adam Möhler. Indeed, Kasper repeatedly appeals to Möhler's dynamic and organic vision of the Church throughout the book. In his doctoral dissertation, he had argued that Möhler's ecclesiology had influenced John Henry Newman, to whom he also makes frequent reference in this work.

Kasper's vision of the church is guided by the teaching of Vatican II. He argues that "the documents of the Council have given us a compass for the way into the future of the new century and millennium" (332). On the disputed question of the interpretation of Vatican II, he cites the distinction made by Benedict XVI between a hermeneutic of interruption and a hermeneutic of continuity and reform. Kasper appeals to the idea of development found in the Tübingen school and Newman, arguing that the interpreter of Vatican II should not speak of a break with tradition but of "a creative continuity in renewal" (13).

The ecclesiology that Kasper develops is based on the notion of the Church as a communion. This ecclesiological vision is grounded in belief in the Trinity. The Church "does not only mirror the inner-Trinitarian *communio*, but, moreover, this *communio* becomes present in the Church" (76). Kasper attributes his focus on a communion ecclesiology to his experience as the theological secretary of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops. In his preparation for that synod he came to the conclusion "that *communio*-ecclesiology was the central concern and the main motif of the conciliar ecclesiology" (21). This ecclesiology, in turn, is rooted in a theological anthropology that understands the human person as essentially encounter and dialogue. It thus envisions the church as an inherently dialogical and participative reality.

With regard to controversial ecclesiological issues, Kasper tends to draw traditional conclusions, though he does so with respect for opposing positions. Since Christ is the head and subject of the church and the Holy Spirit its

soul, one should not speak of the church itself as “sinful”, though one must acknowledge “structures and mentalities of sin in the Church” (172). He argues that the discipline of mandatory celibacy for priests extends back beyond the Middle Ages to the early church and its practice is a witness to the bridal love of Christ for the church. Ongoing discussion about this discipline “is thereby only harmful and counterproductive” (237). For Kasper, there is no indication of women’s ordination in the teachings of Jesus or in Scripture and tradition, and the recent official teachings about the reservation of priestly ordination to men “are of a binding and final character” (238). At the same time, it is necessary to “understand and take up positively the concerns of those who advocate women’s ordination” (238). He argues that the status of deaconesses in the East and the West was different from that of male deacons, and he concludes that ordaining deaconesses is “not a suitable approach to realize the legitimate issue of giving women more space and public status in the Church” (240).

In a secularized Western society, where religion is privatized and marginalized, the church will increasingly find itself to be a diaspora community. Expounding a Trinitarian vision for the future, Kasper enumerates three priorities for the church’s mission: the church must have the courage to speak of God and witness to God as the goal and foundation of all reality; it must begin anew from Jesus Christ, the light of the nations; and it must strive for renewal in the Spirit.

Readers will find many strengths and much from which to draw in Kasper’s work, including: his coherent development of an ecclesiology of communion; his treatment of the role of laity in the church; the exploration of the progress of ecumenical dialogue on various issues in ecclesiology; his articulation of the meaning of the catholicity of the church; and his discussion of the mission of the church in a secularized (Western) society. There are also points of possible critique, among them: though Kasper affirms that the mission of Christ creates a church, he postpones discussion of this mission to the penultimate chapter of the book; with his Western perspective he does not pay much attention to ecclesial developments in other parts of the world, especially the Global South; with regard to the conclusions he draws on controversial ecclesiological issues, readers may find that, while careful study of past tradition is essential, a discernment model for doctrinal development is also needed—one that pays more attention to the signs of the times.

Even with these points of critique, however, Kasper’s book is a major work that, like his earlier books on God and Jesus, will continue to be an important point of reference in the theological conversation about the nature and mission of the church.