

THE CATHOLICITY OF THE CHURCH AND ADVENTIST ECCLESIOLOGY

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1. Introduction

It is a historical fact that the word *catholic* is used in Christian creeds to describe the church.¹ It has been said that all the ancient creeds that embodied belief in Jesus Christ also included the confession of the catholicity of the church.² In spite of the frequency of the term's use, it is conceded that catholicity is notoriously difficult to define.³ The difficulty of definition has been compounded by the fragmentation of the Christian church. Since in the face of fragmentation separated churches asserted themselves against one another, it became difficult to define the term without prejudice. The result,

¹ A. M. Ramsey, "Catholicism," *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 86-87. The list of creeds in which the word occurs along with the words one, holy, and apostolic include, in the East, the Creed of Cyril of Jerusalem, and the Creed of Epiphanius; and in the West the Creed of the Dacian Bishop of Remesiana. The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of AD 381 also expresses belief in the formula "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church."

² Lukas Vischer, Vitaly Borovoy, and Claude Welch, "The Meaning of Catholicity," *Ecumenical Review* 16 (1963): 26.

³ Steven R. Harmon, "Qualitative Catholicity in the Ignatian Correspondence—and the New Testament: The Fallacies of a Restorationist Hermeneutic," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 38 (2011): 35. Recognizing the various levels of meaning of the term *catholic* that need to be distinguished, Avery Dulles enumerates five usages: 1. the adjectival sense where catholic contrasts sectarian; 2. "universal as opposed to local or particular"; 3. "true or authentic as contrasted with false or heretical"; 4. the type of Christianity that attaches particular importance to visible continuity in space and time and visible mediation through social and institutional structures"; and 5. "the title of the church which, organized in the world as a society, is governed by the bishop of Rome." See Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 185.

among Protestants, has been a negative attitude towards the development of the notion of the catholicity of the church. Consequently, the term became associated with the Roman Catholic Church in popular parlance.⁴ It has fallen on the ecumenical movement to refocus discussion on the idea of catholicity. Within ecumenical circles the difficulty of defining catholicity led to the use of other terms such as *ecumenical*, *universal*, or *true*, to characterize the rapprochement among different churches. At the same time, the ecumenical movement has provided a catalyst to consider new ways of confessing catholicity. By the middle of the last century it was remarked that

because "ecumenical" only brings out one dimension of the term "catholic" we may deplore the fact that it has been chosen to describe the modern attempts at reunion and unity. Some part of the responsibility must be attributed to the meaningless but passionate opposing of the terms "Catholic" and "Protestant." But there are signs that as progress is made in these attempts the wider term "catholic" will fill out or burst through the narrower term "ecumenical."⁵

For this reason it is said today that "the question of the meaning of the 'catholicity of the church' not only becomes the most vital problem for every Christian ecclesiology, but is also of basic importance in our inter-Christian ecumenical dialogue."⁶

Although Seventh-day Adventists (SDAs) are not official participants in the ecumenical movement, it is imperative not to think ecclesiology as if the movement does not exist. As Evangelicals and Roman Catholics re-formulate their thoughts on catholicity, what do SDAs have to say about these developments? At the least, SDAs need to be able to account for ways in which ecclesiology either intersects or departs from ecclesiological developments within the ecumenical movement. This paper reflects on new ways of thinking about the catholicity of the church and how SDA ecclesiology might relate to them. The discussion will be divided into three sections: catholicity *then* (before the ecumenical movement); catholicity *now* (since the ecumenical movement); and catholicity *now* as related between Roman Catholic and SDA ecclesiology.

⁴ Vischer, Borovoy, and Welch, "The Meaning of Catholicity," 34.

⁵ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation: Part 1*, vol. 4 of *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 703.

⁶ Vischer, Borovoy, and Welch, "The Meaning of Catholicity," 26.

2. Catholicity *Then*

Although referring to references on catholicity before the ecumenical movement with the phrase “catholicity *then*,” the purpose is not to give the impression that there was any consensus of meaning during this period. Perhaps, as this paper tries to show, the common distinguishing feature about this particular notion during this period was that, however conceived, catholicity was seen as a *possession*; something to be possessed.

With regards to the meaning of catholicity, the Bible is not very helpful since it does not use the word in the theological sense.⁷ It is generally agreed that the earliest Christian use of the term is attested in Ignatius of Antioch’s letter to the Smyrneans.⁸ Dulles dismisses this usage in Ignatius as fleeting and hence unfruitful in the search for the meaning of the term, but Steve R. Harmon disagrees. In the latter’s view the phrase ἡ καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία in Smyrneans 8.2 has been etymologically and correctly translated in Bart Ehrman’s translation in the new LCL edition as “wherever Jesus Christ is, there also is the universal church.”⁹ The idea of the church as universal derives from this conclusion. That is, catholicity is a quantitative expression that encompasses the wholeness, totality, or universality of the church.¹⁰ Harmon argues that already in Ignatius there was a qualitative sense of the church.¹¹ In any case, by the time of Cyril of Jerusalem (middle of the fourth

⁷ Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 13.

⁸ See for example *ibid.*, 14 and Vischer, Borovoy, and Welch, “The Meaning of Catholicity,” 26.

⁹ See Bart D. Ehrman, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers* (2 vols.; LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1:305, quoted in Harmon, “Qualitative Catholicity,” 36. The simple translation of the phrase as “the catholic church” is seen as transliterative.

¹⁰ Harmon, “Qualitative Catholicity,” 36.

¹¹ Harmon notes that “one paragraph prior to the description of the church as ‘catholic’ in *Smyrneans* 8, Ignatius warns the church at Smyrna regarding the doctrine and practice of the Docetists, ‘They abstain from the eucharist and prayer, since they do not confess that the eucharist is the flesh of our savior Jesus Christ, which suffered on behalf of our sins and which the Father raised in his kindness.’” *Ibid.*, 37. Furthermore, “Ignatius links the doctrinal errors of the Docetists, who lacked a truly embodied Christology, with their failures to embody the Christian way of life: ‘But take note of those who [are heterodox with reference to] the gracious gift of Jesus Christ that has come to us, and see how they are opposed to the mind of God. They have no interest in love, in the widow, the orphan, the oppressed, the one who is in chains or the one set free, the one who is hungry or the one who thirsts.’” *Ibid.* Harmon’s conclusion is that for Ignatius, qualitative catholicity is robustly incarnation and therefore sacramental and concerned with social justice. See *ibid.*

century) a more precise and comprehensive sense of the term including both quantitative and qualitative aspects seemed to be emerging. Cyril argues that

the Church is called Catholic because it is spread throughout the world, from end to end of the earth; also because it teaches universally and completely all the doctrines which [one] should know concerning things visible and invisible, heavenly and earthly; and also because it subjects to right worship all [hu]mankind, rulers and ruled, lettered and unlettered; further because it treats and heals universally every sort of sin committed by soul and body, and it possesses in itself every conceivable virtue, whether in deeds, words or in spiritual gifts of every kind.¹²

In the quotation above, Cyril provides five bases for the church's catholicity: it extends to the ends of the earth; teaches all necessary doctrines; brings all humans into subjection; treats and heals every kind of sin; and possesses every conceivable virtue. The Donatist controversy in North Africa during the fourth and fifth centuries brought about further developments in the notion of catholicity. The Donatists qualitatively identified catholicity with strict obedience to the commandments while the *orthodox*, such as Augustine, emphasized the communion and quantitative spread of the church over the whole world as essential to catholicity. Augustine in particular stressed the spirituality of the church's communion, which, he argued, is sealed by the sacrament of the Eucharist.¹³ Augustine's view on catholicity prevailed throughout the Middle Ages.

The failure of the Council of Florence (1431-1445) to unite the East and West, followed by the break-up of the Western church during the Reformation, created new challenges for the meaning of catholicity. On their part, the Orthodox churches argued and claimed catholicity qualitatively on the basis of their adherence to the fullness of the faith handed to them from the fathers. In the face of additional opposition from the Reformation, Roman Catholics, on their part, entrenched their views on catholicity in Augustine's quantitative position, thus insisting to be the true church by reason of their wider geographical extension. It was only a natural step for Roman Catholics, in the nineteenth century, to couple geographical extension with "a special concern for visible unity, understood as an adherence to the same set of doctrines, rites, and hierarchical leaders."¹⁴ On the part of

¹² See Bernard M. Peebles, ed., *The Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*, vol. 2. of *The Fathers of the Church*, trans. Leo P. McCauley and Anthony A. Stephenson (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1970), 132.

¹³ Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16. Dulles notes furthermore that "all four attributes or marks of the church [one, holy, catholic, and apostolic] tended to be reduced to apostolicity, in the sense

Protestants, many early Lutheran theologians claimed the title of catholicity for their church, depriving Rome of the title as they argued that the latter had introduced doctrinal innovations and thereby departed from catholicity. Thus while Roman Catholics emphasized *quantitative* catholicity Protestants stressed *qualitative* catholicity.

The nineteenth century saw other more divergent developments among both Roman Catholics and Protestants. Among Roman Catholics, the Romanticism of the early nineteenth century created a new enthusiasm for catholic tradition both in Germany (the Tuebingen School of Johann Sebastian Drey and Johann Adam Mohler) and Britain (the Oxford movement under John Keble, Edward Pusey, and John Henry Newman). Catholicity for these movements was more imaginative and liturgical, focusing on the life of grace in the church mediated through the church and its sacraments. On the Protestant side, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Enlightenment spawned liberal Protestantism. This movement saw Catholicism (comprising traditionalism, orthodoxy, ritualism, and monasticism) rather with suspicion, “a kind of original fall from grace which overtook the church in the course of its history.”¹⁵

What seems clear in this brief survey of the history of catholicity is that a term was born and developed out of contest for Christian identity. Harmon is therefore correct in arguing that even Ignatius’s quantitative use of catholicity does not exclude “a much more narrow meaning that increasingly became associated with the later patristic use of the Greek *καθολικός* and the Latin *catholicus* with reference to the pattern of faith and practice that distinguished early catholic Christianity from Docetism and eventually from Gnosticism, Marcionism, Arianism, Donatism, and all manner of other heresies and schisms.”¹⁶ In the context of conflict and separated communions, then, a community was/is either catholic or not, in the sense of *possession*.¹⁷ However catholic was defined, a faith community was either deemed to possess it or not. The notion of possession was/is also at the heart of the struggle over the marks of the “true church.”

Karl Barth’s discussion of catholicity in his *Dogmatics* clearly portrays it as a possession of the true church. First, he affirms that the adjective catholic means general and comprehensive; and speaks of an identity, continuity

of obedience to the bishops who were in union with the pope, and thus ultimately obedience to the pope himself as supreme vicar of Christ.” Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 17.

¹⁶ Harmon, “Qualitative Catholicity,” 37.

¹⁷ Vischer, Borovoy, and Welch, “The Meaning of Catholicity,” 25.

and universality, which is maintained in all differences. Applying catholicity to the church he observes, "It means that it *has* a character in virtue of which it is always and everywhere the same and always and everywhere recognizable in this sameness, to the preservation of which it is committed. In the character of this sameness it exists and shows itself to be the true church."¹⁸ For Barth, that church is true and catholic which explicitly seeks to confirm its identity in all its forms. In this sense, a "Church is catholic or it is not the Church."¹⁹ It was a great sign of weakness, in Barth's view, that Protestants surrendered the term to Romanists, while they themselves were described derogatively as a-catholics or schismatics, "as though a genuine church and theology could have any other tendency at all than one which is not merely 'catholicising' but seriously 'catholic!'"²⁰

Barth explains that the "catholic" essence of the church, which it seeks to maintain in all its forms, was first primarily understood in a *geographical* sense, namely, that the church was identical in all parts of the world where it exists. Out of this narrower sense has derived a broader sense in terms of the church's relationship to natural and socio-historical institutions such as race, culture, and classes. Here, catholicity of the church means that church cannot allow its conception of itself to be dictated by these realities. "Christians will always be Christians first," Barth observes, "and only then members of a specific culture or state or class or the like."²¹ Next, Barth describes an even broader sense of catholicity from the *temporal* perspective. The church is catholic in a temporal way when it maintains itself in the "identity of its essence even in the historical sequence of its forms."²² In other words, although the church is subject to continual change, it cannot become something other than itself. Barth's key point is that the church is catholic neither simply in its oldest or newest form, "but in every age, and in controversy with the spirit of the age, to ask concerning the form and doctrine and ministry which is in accordance with the unalterable essence of the church.... It means never to grow tired of returning not to the origin in time but to the origin in substance of the community."²³ Finally, Barth relates the principle of catholicity to *individual* believers, for whom catholicity will mean that their faith has its basis, norm, and limit in the Christian community and not

¹⁸ Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, 701. Emphasis supplied.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 702.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 703.

²² *Ibid.*, 704.

²³ *Ibid.*, 705.

in them as individuals. He points out in particular that individuals' personal knowledge and confession ought to be coordinated with and subordinated to the knowledge and confession of the community.²⁴

It should be noted that consistent with Barth's Reformation heritage, the essence of the church for which catholicity is predicated is Jesus Christ. He observes,

And if in anything at all, then in this clear knowledge of its limit it will be catholic—in its satisfaction with Jesus Christ Himself, in the fact that it will not give to its activity any other character than that of a diaconate or witness in His service, that it will be zealous and loyal in this character, that it will not invest it with any kind of mysterious importance or magic or thaumaturgy or supernatural legality or authoritative claim, that, in the words of 1 Thess, 5[17], it will simply prove it by praying without ceasing. He, the living Son of God, is himself its identical and continuing and universal essence.... He is the source and norm of its identity: the *veritas catholica*.²⁵

3. Catholicity *Now*: A Roman Catholic Perspective

Social, cultural, and religious movements that arose in the wake of the Enlightenment have called into question several of the existing conceptualizations of the church's catholicity. Fidelity to the early church fathers came to be viewed as anachronistic, and the diversity, sheer spread, and international organization of various Christian communities in the world made the exclusive catholic claims of the Roman Catholic Church ring hollow. Meanwhile, the globalization of World Religions (Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc.) and non-religious ideologies such as Marxism seemed to make Christian claims of hegemony sound paternalistic.²⁶ In this climate rethinking of catholicity seemed inevitable.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 712.

²⁶ We should observe with Herman Bavinck that "the Catholicity of the church that is confessed by all Christians presupposes the catholicity of the Christian religion. It is based on the conviction that Christianity is a world religion that should govern all people and sanctify all creatures irrespective of geography, nationality, place, and time." See Herman Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," *CTJ* 27 (1992): 221.

Both Roman Catholic and Protestant emphasize Christology in their understanding and rethinking of catholicity. On the Roman Catholic side, the focus is on ideas drawn from Dulles' *The Catholicity of the Church*. The word catholic may have been derived from the Greek adverbial phrase *Kath' holou*, and therefore probably means "wholeness."²⁷ From this viewpoint, Dulles sees the term *pleroma* in Col 2:9 as perhaps the nearest equivalent of what Christians call catholicity. He goes on to delineate four distinctive aspects of catholicity: 1. Catholicity from above, 2. Catholicity from below, 3. Catholicity in breadth, and 4. Catholicity in length.²⁸

3.1. Catholicity from Above: The Height of Catholicity

The *pleroma* of Christ means that he is the ultimate embodiment of the catholicity which the church reflects. Dulles reflects on the catholicity of Christ and its implications for the church under three aspects: (i) incarnationally, (ii) as head of creation, and (iii) as head of the church. Incarnationally, the church's catholicity, must be reflective of the fact that the divine word of God has entered into a kind of union with the cosmos. As head of creation, Dulles seeks to heal what he calls the "unfortunate cleavage" that was placed in the West between body and spirit, nature and person, and faith and reason. The incarnation should have a bearing not only on human destiny but on the larger universe of nature as well. Thus, Dulles is appreciative of the work of such Roman Catholic scholars as Maurice Blondel and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who conclude that the existence and career of Christ "have constitutive and transformative importance for the entire universe, including both the material and spiritual realms."²⁹ Dulles goes so far as to endorse Teilhard's postulate of a third nature of Christ which he called cosmic, as well as his notion of "pleromatization" which signified "the completion received by the expanding universe as all things are brought into convergence by the Christic energies of love."³⁰ Reflecting on the meaning of Christ's headship of the church for its catholicity, Dulles explores Paul's metaphor of Christ as the head of the church which is his

²⁷ Ramsey, "Catholicism," 86-87.

²⁸ Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 30-47.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 37. Dulles notes that the "'pan-Christic' universalism of Blondel and Teilhard de Chardin has, in some respects, become official Catholic teaching in Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World." *Ibid.*, 38.

body (Eph 5:22-24). "Because the head and the body make up one mystical person," Dulles remarks, "they prolong Christ's very self in space and time. By a kind of exchange of properties, similar between the human and divine natures in Christ, what belongs to the head can be predicated of the body, and vice versa."³¹ He uses the same imagery to call on churches involved in ecumenism to embark on the recovery of catholicity.

3.2. Catholicity from Below: The Depth of Catholicity

Dulles points out that the fullness or plenitude in Christ requires a corresponding anthropology that makes its possibility meaningful. He reiterates the Roman Catholic understanding that when the Holy Spirit enters the human realm, it penetrates not only the spiritual faculties of intellect and will but the person's whole being, including the sensory and bodily aspects.³² Therefore, Dulles' view is that God's redemptive action should be studied not merely from quasi-judicial categories such as justification and imputation but in the ontological categories of creation and re-creation. Here, Dulles joins those who criticize Luther for allegedly disparaging the natural because of his teaching on *total depravity*. He argues that while Roman Catholics initially responded to *Protestant exaggerations* by overemphasizing the continuity between the natural and unnatural, Roman Catholic theology preserves nature intact even as it underwent some impairment because of sin.

The positive appreciation of nature in Roman Catholic theology has had implications in several directions. First, "human reason, in the present state of fallen nature, retains its ability to establish the existence of God."³³ Second, the positive appraisal of nature means a reverence for the body, which is reflected in the liturgy of Catholicism which focuses not only on the ear but to all the senses.³⁴ Third, based on this reasoning there is a positive reception of Karl Rahner's idea that "every morally good act of man is, in the actual order of salvation, also a supernaturally salutary act."³⁵ The

³¹ Ibid., 41.

³² Ibid., 48.

³³ Ibid., 52.

³⁴ Ibid., 55.

³⁵ Ibid., 59.

presupposition for this view has to be the Roman Catholic idea that the offering of grace is universal.³⁶ Fourth, the theology of nature has also led to a positive appreciation of world religions. While leaving open the question of whether non-Christian religions contain revelation and are in themselves salvific, the Second Vatican Council was able to hold the following two principles in tension: (i) non-Christian faiths often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men and (ii) the church must always proclaim Christ as the one in whom the fullness of religious life is found.³⁷ Finally, since the whole creation comes under the concern of Christ's redemption, "the Church cannot simply abandon the world to its own devices or accept an unresolved dualism between the sacred and the secular."³⁸

In sum, the idea that humans and the creation are by nature constituted to participate in the plenitude of Christ represents what is called vertical catholicity.

3.3. Catholicity in Breadth: Mission and Communion

The church's catholicity in breadth reflects the fullness of Christ in its universal dimension as anticipated in Christ's ministry. While on the one hand the ministry seemed limited to the lost sheep of Israel (Matt 10:6; 15:24), its future expansiveness was already hinted at (Matt 8:10-12; 25:31-46; Luke 10:29-37). Dulles believes that the fourfold "all" in Matt 28:18-19 certifies the catholic character of the church's mission. Much of the NT evidences the intensification of the church's universalism after Christ (Gal 3:27-28; Col 3:10-11; Eph 2:14). In Dulles' view, missionary activity in the early modern period caused the Roman Catholic Church to "come to a deeper realization that the sphere of Christ's redemptive work is much wider than the church as a visible society."³⁹ Thus, it is in spreading her faith that the church *actualizes* her own catholicity. Dulles explains, "Constituted in the world as a sacrament, or efficacious sign, of God's universal redemptive will in Christ, the Church is driven by an inner dynamism to represent the whole of humanity as the recipient of redemption."⁴⁰

³⁶ Ibid., 58.

³⁷ Ibid., 60-61.

³⁸ Ibid., 64.

³⁹ Ibid., 73.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 74.

The question of inculturation has not been lost on Dulles in this rethinking. The implication, for him, is that it makes for openness to different spiritualities, different ways of thinking about the faith, different styles of worship, etc. as an expression of unity to be distinguished from uniformity. In this way, the Christian life is to be accommodated to the genius and richness of all nations, not only for the living, but also for “those who have passed into the life to come.”⁴¹

3.4. Catholicity in Length: Tradition and Development

Dulles recognizes that the historical continuity of the church is generally discussed under the notion of apostolicity, yet he is also aware of the concept of *catholicity in time* in Roman Catholic tradition. The concept appeals to him partly because of the correspondence between time and space. And in both cases his view is that between Pentecost and the parousia, the church is the symbolic center out of which the fullness of Christ spreads to all creation. Dulles weighs in on the debate regarding the condition of the church during this period. First, the church in history really participates in the grace of Christ. Christ’s *pleroma* inheres in the church “as something it can never lose,” according to the Second Vatican Council.⁴² It is a gift that is inseparable from the *being* of the church. Thus on the spectrum of the history of the church either (i) as a decline from original purity, (ii) as unbroken progress towards future fullness, (iii) as a perpetuation of an original endowment, Dulles grants that “Catholic Christianity is committed to a fundamental continuity. It holds that the Holy Spirit, having inspired the apostolic Scriptures, continues to be with the Church at every stage of her development preventing her from betraying the apostolic heritage.”⁴³

Dulles grants, however, that in the past Catholic theology had not easily come to terms with the realities of history and confused continuity with immutability just as they had universality with uniformity. In Dulles’ assessment, tradition today is a dynamic, progressive concept. From this perspective, catholicity is a heterogeneous unity; a unity in difference, implying that catholicity in time includes an element of discontinuity; calling for responsiveness to time and seasons, and thus bringing to expression the

⁴¹ Ibid., 84.

⁴² Thomas P. Rausch, *Catholicism in the Third Millennium*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 58.

⁴³ Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 98.

catholic fullness of the church.⁴⁴ Dulles points out that catholicity in time and its implications for realizing the integral reality of Christianity undercuts Protestants' rallying cry of "Scripture alone."

After this brief overview of Roman Catholic rethinking of catholicity, it is possible to conclude that without setting aside the notion of catholicity as a *possession* of the church, a more dynamic notion of catholicity as a *task* seems to be taking root.

4. Catholicity Now: A Non-Roman Perspective

At the Faith and Order Conference of the World Council of Churches held in Montreal in 1963, Claude Welch provided some significant Protestant reflections on the catholicity of the church.⁴⁵ Welch recognized the paucity of reflection on catholicity among Protestants, and noted the polemic tenor in which the few extant reflections were cast. From the outset, then, he intended his thinking on catholicity to be free from the polemic heritage in which communions try to interpret it in a way that becomes their sole possession.

In Welch's view, the way forward to a rich and fruitful deliberation on catholicity is to think about it as an *image* which suggests, connotes, as well as denotes without being rigid and static, but dynamic and fluid. For him, this suggestion is not a retreat into vagueness, romanticism, or eclecticism, but rather a reflection of the way he sees the NT as witnessing to Jesus Christ as *the truth*, employing many images to communicate a phenomenon that transcends verbal formulation. To think of the catholicity of the church in this way is to think about the church's life as participation in Christ, who is the head of the church, through the Holy Spirit. From this perspective, catholicity is not a possession or quality. Rather, it is a *means* by which the church sees itself *in* the wholeness (*pleroma*) of God and of Jesus Christ.

Two clear consequences flow from Welch's suggestion. First, because the life of the church comes from the head, catholicity can be spoken of as a *gift* and not something to be generated or possessed by the community apart from Christ. The image of catholicity must refer less to something the church "is" than "to the reality of the Church as 'being-in-becoming,'" "a sense of continuous and free presence and working of Christ and the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 102.

⁴⁵ Vischer, Borovoy, and Welch, "The Meaning of Catholicity," 34-35.

Spirit.”⁴⁶ Second, since catholicity in Welch’s image is a continuous phenomenon, it indicates a task calling for expression and practice rather than a possession. Furthermore, Welch considers some key dimensions of meaning for catholicity, which his concept of image brings.

First, catholicity points to a wholeness of the *truth* in Christ, which is not to be confused with *qualitative* definitions of catholicity or with such other definitions as the *true church*. The authenticity or truth with which catholicity is rightly concerned is not best conceived of as true doctrine or fidelity in witness. Welch observes, “insofar as ‘catholic church’ means ‘true church’ it means the fullness of the truth in which the Church lives, the whole truth of Christ understood in movement from the centre outward and not as any limited arc on the circumference.”⁴⁷ Such catholic truth is less a totality of teaching than an invitation to express Jesus Christ as the one concrete truth in his wholeness. It is a wholeness that resists a single pattern of interpretation. It is a catholicity that views other traditions as not foreign once they are rooted in Christ. It is a “catholicity in method,” a mode of thinking that calls attention to God’s work as a whole in the past, present, and future, incorporating a variety of theological models and overcoming “apparent antinomies by renewing and deepening every thought in the wholeness of Christ.”⁴⁸

Second, catholicity as conceived by Welch intensifies the church’s understanding of mission. The incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ have such a depth of engagement and universal significance that catholicity cannot accept limitations of geography or distinctions of caste, class, or race as well as churchly imperialism. Here Welch comes close to the Roman Catholic position by suggesting that catholicity in the church is a reflex of the catholicity of God’s grace and truth in creation.

Third, the fullness of Christ makes any effort to establish marks of catholicity to be uncatholic. The fullness of Christ may be authentically expressed via unexpected media other than word and sacrament. Hence *catholic* is not to be prefaced by any denominational qualifier. All should gratefully acknowledge the ways in which the fullness of Christ is manifest in other Christian bodies.

Finally, since catholicity as a gift and task reaches every particular church everywhere, “every proclamation of the Word and celebration of the sacrament, every act of ministry and mercy in the name of Christ, every effort to manifest his creative and reconciling power, must be undertaken

⁴⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 40.

as an act of and for and in the 'whole' Church."⁴⁹

Contemporary evangelical thinking on catholicity does not differ much in substance from Welch's view, except perhaps in its stronger emphasis on what one might call *gospel catholicity*. Mark Dever concludes in his brief essay on "A Catholic Church" observing, "The church's catholicity is rooted in and bounded by the gospel's catholicity. Anytime, anywhere, anyone can be forgiven his or her sins by faith alone in the one and only Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ. That is the true catholic doctrine of the true catholic church. If your church does not teach that, it is not catholic, no matter what's on the sign outside."⁵⁰ Dever grounds his argument mainly in his exegesis of Gal 3:26-29, noting it to be "the text that has within it the universal, or catholic, nature of the church."⁵¹ The implications of this gospel catholicity, which Dever draws, especially those of contra provincialism, contra sectarianism, and contra racism are not unlike the conclusions of both Dulles and Welch in their ecumenical import. He remarks,

[D]enominations, and those distinctives that separate us from other evangelicals, should never be allowed to become ultimate. Confessing that there is a catholic church does not mean that denominations are necessarily wrong. Insofar as they allow Christians in good conscience to work for the kingdom, and they do not breed an uncharitable and wrongly divisive spirit, they can be helpful.... But the recognition of what we hold in common among true, faithful Christians must always be valued more highly and held more deeply than that which divides us. The gospel is displayed in its essentials when our distinctives are relegated to important but nonessential status. Understanding the truly catholic nature of the true church works against our wrong-headed sectarianism.⁵²

5. Summary of Perspectives on *Catholicity Now*

Although Dulles and Welch approach the subject of catholicity differently, there is a great degree of similarity between their positions. Dulles' exploration of the *pleroma* of Christ through his incarnation, and his headship of

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁰ Richard D. Phillips, Philip G. Ryken, and Mark E. Dever, *The Church: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2004), 92.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 89.

creation and the church bears a close resemblance to Welch's "master-image"⁵³ of catholicity. By bringing the *person* of Christ to the center of the discussion, Dulles and Welch seem to have managed to create a wide enough circumference, quantitatively and qualitatively, for the church that is able to accommodate competing and even potentially discordant voices. Furthermore, a key aspect to note in this formulation is what I call a *uni-focal or uni-directional catholicity* where the church has an integral identity as *one entity* during what Dulles calls the "pilgrim Church within historical time." Then, he asserts that

the Church at this stage [between Pentecost and the parousia] already participates in a real, definitive, though imperfect manner, in the fullness of God's gift in Christ; secondly, that this participation brings about a real continuity or communion between different generations of Christians; thirdly, that the different periods of the Church, notwithstanding this continuity, have their own distinctive character, so that the latter is able to complement and complete what has been initiated by the earlier.⁵⁴

Contemporary evangelical thinking on catholicity as represented by Dever's "gospel-centered" approach displays the same *uni-focal or uni-directional catholicity* noted immediately above. These formulations of catholicity are very appropriate to an ecumenical climate. They also demonstrate postmodern sensitivity. The issue that remains now is how to relate SDA ecclesiology to these developments.

6. SDA Ecclesiology and Catholicity

Now

SDA definition of the church as "the community of believers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour"⁵⁵ bears a close resemblance to Ignatius' definition of the church. Indeed, it is similar in essence to how Protestants in general define the church.⁵⁶ In contrast, however, SDAs go a step further

⁵³ Vischer, Borovoy, and Welch, "The Meaning of Catholicity," 35.

⁵⁴ Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 92.

⁵⁵ See Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: An Exposition of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), 163. Recall Bart Ehrman's translation of Ignatius' phrase *ἡ καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία* in Smyrneans 8.2 as "wherever Jesus Christ is, there also is the universal church."

⁵⁶ See, for example, John Dillenberger and Claude Welch, *Protestant Christianity* (New

to make a distinction between a *universal church* and a *remnant church*. It is affirmed that “[t]he universal church is composed of all who truly believe in Christ, but in the last days, a time of widespread apostasy, a remnant has been called to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.”⁵⁷ To the extent that SDAs identify themselves with the remnant while acknowledging the universal church, it may be said that SDA ecclesiology is characteristically remnant ecclesiology. It is clearly a bi-directional⁵⁸ ecclesiology, implying that SDAs may only speak of catholicity from a bi-directional perspective. The validity of this approach will be discussed later.

It would seem, however, that an ecclesiology such as remnant ecclesiology and its implications for catholicity is the kind of caveat that *catholicity now* wishes to deliver. A remnant ecclesiology could potentially come across as *uncatholic*, triumphalistic, and arrogant. Indeed, SDAs have been so accused. Yet, it is instructive to note that SDAs share some key concerns of ecclesiology and catholicity with contemporary thinking on the matter.

6.1. The Centrality of Christ

We have already noted that reflections on catholicity *now* focus on the person of Christ. For Dulles the *pleroma* of Christ means that he is the ultimate embodiment of catholicity, just as for Welch catholicity is a *means* by which the church sees itself *in* the wholeness (*pleroma*) of God and of Jesus Christ. Dever’s gospel-christocentric focus has been noted. SDAs would also say that “theologically speaking, Jesus Christ is the truest ‘remnant.’”⁵⁹ From these perspectives, it would seem that the concepts of catholicity and remnant should have a close relationship. Upon close investigation, however, a significant divergence becomes evident between contemporary views on the centrality of Christ in catholicity and the SDA placement of Christ at the center of the remnant.

From the Roman Catholic point of view, the centrality of Christ has ended up in a view of the church as a sacrament. This view was already

York: Macmillan, 1988), 42. They declared, “The church is the community or fellowship of believers, those who are committed to God in Christ and who live by God’s mercy and power.” *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 181.

⁵⁸ See Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, “Concluding Essay: God’s End-Time Remnant and the Christian Church,” in *Toward a Theology of the Remnant*, ed. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, vol. 1 of *Studies in Adventist Ecclesiology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2009), 217.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 202.

evident in Dulles' reflections on "catholicity from above." It has been said that one of the more durable achievements of the Second Vatican Council was its construal of the church as a sacrament. Christ's connection to the world is defined in sacramental terms through the church. Hence, the church is defined as a "sacrament – a sign and instrument, that is – of communion with God and of unity among all people."⁶⁰ We noted above that even Welch comes close to the Roman Catholic position by suggesting that catholicity of the church is a reflex of the catholicity of God's grace and truth in creation; Dever's views stand close to Welch's.

SDAs, on the other hand, identify Christ as the truest remnant not in sacramental terms, or even from a gospel interpreted christocentrism, but from a theological understanding of the remnant as the means of God's continuous plan of salvation.⁶¹ From its root meaning of "what is left of a community after it undergoes a catastrophe," the remnant motif became incorporated into salvation history as an expression of the future expectations of those who had faith in Yahweh.⁶² The remnant as the nucleus of God's true people became the means of God's redemptive work in the face of all manner of difficulties (1 Kgs 19:14; 2 Kgs 17:18; 25:11; Ezra 9:8; Isa 11:10-13; 65:8; Jer 31:7-9). It is in his position as God's ultimate *instrument* for the salvation of humankind that Christ stands at the watershed of God's redemptive activity. As one who remained absolutely loyal to God on earth, and paid the price for humanity's rebellion, and thereby preserved the human race, Christ has become the ultimate and truest remnant.

6.2. Catholicity as Continuity

Reflections on catholicity from all sides show the need to affirm the continuity of the church as the people of God. We have seen above the Roman Catholic view in Dulles's discussion of this issue under "catholicity in length" where he states that the unity of the church "as something she can

⁶⁰ Quoted in Nathan Mitchell, "Sacrament: More Than Meets the Eye," *Worship* 83 (2009): 350.

⁶¹ For a complete discussion of the concept of the remnant as the motif for addressing the question of life and death throughout the OT, see Rodriguez's *Toward a Theology of the Remnant*.

⁶² Lester V. Meyer, "Remnant," *ABD* 5:669, as quoted in Tarsee Li, "The Remnant in the Old Testament," in *Toward a Theology of the Remnant*, ed. Angel Manuel Rodriguez, vol. 1 of *Studies in Adventist Ecclesiology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2009), 23.

never lose.”⁶³ Here, as before, sacramentality guarantees continuity, except in this case Christ’s sacramental presence in the church is also guaranteed by the apostles and their successors, the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church. The Protestant view of Welch, though fundamentally different from the Roman Catholic approach, guarantees continuity through the concept of “catholicity in method.” We may recall this idea as a mode of thinking that comprehends God’s work as incorporating a variety of theological models and overcoming “apparent antinomies by renewing and deepening every thought in the wholeness of Christ.”⁶⁴ In this way, the door of the potential for continuity among all expression of the church seems wide open. For Dever, the gospel is the key to the historical continuity and global solidarity of the church. For this reason, he chides Baptists’ congregational church polity.⁶⁵

The issue of continuity of the people of God is also critical to SDAs’ remnant ecclesiology. Indeed, for them, the remnant concept is *the principle* of continuity. The theological notion of the *faithful* remnant in particular addresses the continuity of God’s people in the Bible. In his tripartite typology of the remnant concept in biblical theology, Gerhard Hasel distinguished the faithful remnant as a group marked “by their genuine spirituality and true faith relationship with God; this remnant is the carrier of all divine election promises.”⁶⁶ Eugene Merrill’s observation summarizes the key point about the remnant as the principle of continuity:

It was a fact that the people of the Lord always tended to fall away from Him except for a small minority, the remnant, who would remain faithful to their covenant responsibilities. In other words, there was always an Israel within Israel, the true kernel surrounded by the husk of an external national entity. The saving purposes and promises of Yahweh could not, therefore, find fulfilment in the nation as such but only in that godly core that He preserved through the ages.⁶⁷

⁶³ Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 94.

⁶⁴ Vischer, Borovoy, and Welch, “The Meaning of Catholicity,” 40.

⁶⁵ Phillips, Ryken, and Dever, *The Church*, 74-76.

⁶⁶ Gerhard Hasel, “Remnant,” *ISBE* 130.

⁶⁷ Eugene H. Merrill, “A Theology of Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther,” in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody, 1991), p. 194, quoted in Li, “The Remnant in the Old Testament,” 30.

6.3. Qualitative Catholicity

An aspect of catholicity which seems to receive less and less attention is what used to be known as qualitative catholicity, which in the context of the Donatist controversy meant obedience to God's commandments. The idea was present in Cyril of Jerusalem with his comment on the church's teaching of all the doctrines which one ought to know concerning things visible and invisible, heavenly and earthly. We may also recall Harmon's insistence that Ignatius used catholicity qualitatively as a pattern for faith and practice that distinguished early *catholic* Christians from other religious groups. The idea was clearly present in the early Reformers who, contending that their own church was catholic because it "adhered to the doctrine of Scripture and to the common teaching of the Fathers of the ancient, undivided Church. They accused Rome of having introduced doctrinal innovations and of having departed from catholicity."⁶⁸ Today, qualitative catholicity is defined with no effort to exploit catholicity as a visible mark of the true church but rather as the quality by which the church expresses the fullness, integrity, and totality of life in Christ.⁶⁹

On this issue, the contribution of SDA remnant ecclesiology to a truly biblical concept of catholicity could be substantial. The remnant principle is capable of maintaining the historical continuity of the people of God while at the same time introducing necessary distinctions. The bi-directional nature of SDA catholicity comes to view here. The idea is already inherent in Christ's remark: "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also" (John 10:16). God's people in the last days are spread out in a "universal church" that goes beyond denominationalism, and which necessarily is invisible. In SDA understanding, an eschatological remnant (Rev 12:17) has been called out as God's visible means of bringing his people into one sheep pen.⁷⁰ God's people then, presently, exist bi-focally in a visible remnant and in an invisible universal church. SDA remnant ecclesiology, therefore, informs a bi-directional/bi-focal catholicity which is at the same time quantitative and qualitative.

⁶⁸ Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 16.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷⁰ For a full discussion on the marks of the visible remnant and SDA appropriation of it, see chapters 5, 6, 8, and 11 of Rodriguez's *Toward a Theology of the Remnant*.

6.4. Quantitative Catholicity

Quantitative catholicity, Dulles' "catholicity in breadth" discussed previously, draws our attention to the mission and geographical aspects of catholicity. Remnant based catholicity along with contemporary thinking on catholicity emphasizes the elimination of distinctions of caste, class, or race. In Dulles' estimation this makes for openness to different spiritualities, different ways of thinking about the faith, different styles of worship, etc. The risk of syncretism is ever present in this approach. In any case, remnant based catholicity is intensely quantitative in these geographical respects. The mission of the remnant is portrayed with the image of an angel flying in mid-heaven with the eternal gospel directed to "those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people" (Rev 14:6). The heart of the gospel to be presented by the remnant, however, does not seem to be as concerned with socio-cultural issues, or even limited to issues of justification and sanctification, as important as they are, as it does with calling people's attention to obedience, fear of God, and true worship (Rev 14:7-14). From the viewpoint of mission, therefore, remnant based catholicity ties neatly together both quantitative and qualitative aspects of catholicity.

7. Conclusion

Thinking on the notion of the church's catholicity has evolved and developed since its initial attestation in Ignatius of Antioch. It seems that the concept has its roots in the wholeness (*pleroma*) which is found in Christ as it is reflected in the church. The development of the concept, therefore, represents the various dimensions in which this wholeness in Christ is expressed in and through the Christian church. It is perhaps helpful to say that all of these dimensions may be summed up from the two viewpoints of quantitative and qualitative catholicity. Recent ecumenical discussions appear to focus on quantitative aspects of catholicity, but a wholesome catholicity must incorporate qualitative concerns as well. It would seem that the *biblical* doctrine of the remnant seems even better suited to address the ecclesiological concerns of the *pleroma* of Christ than the *theological* doctrine of catholicity.