

Lawler and Shanahan propose a currently out of favour view that emphasizes the secondary nature of institutional hierarchy. They rather note the creative nature of the Spirit in the Church (488) and the potential for deeper exploration of meaning within the Church (491). They outline the ebbing achievements of Vatican 2 where the Church was acknowledged as a “graced communion” rather than an organisation.

Several of their insights impact on how sacraments are to be celebrated.

If mystery is at the centre of the Church rather than the structure of Pope, Bishops and Priests then the sacraments themselves define the Church. These sacraments need to be the means by which “people in communion with Christ make him visible, accessible and active in the world.” (498)

The recognition of the journeying Church, a pilgrim people, further marks it as provisional and incomplete, but therefore with potential for growth, seeking new solutions for new situations. The organic nature of all this (497) limits the potential for liturgy to be imposed from above. As a prophetic people under constant renewal, a local community is formed and reformed by their sacramental life and if it has alien elements forced upon it they must be rejected like a mismatched transplanted organ or the Church dies. On the other hand mere individual innovation is a mutation that is also deleterious and if not part of the communal expression will also be rejected. Creativity has to ring true with both the tradition and the evolving situation of the Church; this is how I see the Holy Spirit acting in the Church.

I hadn’t noted the distinction between the People of God and the Laity before and I think it is an important one. They note that the Church is not a democracy and I had only previously seen that as an argument for a monarchical Church, so I was happy to see another way of looking at it.

The analogy of Jesus as the Sun and the Church as a waxing and waning moon is delightful if a little redolent of Sol Invictus. With the moon’s effect on the tides, could we join it with Matthew Arnold’s analogy of the withdrawing tide in “Dover Beach” to await a possible king tide?