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*Ecclesiology in a time of Institutional Diminishment:
The Paschal Trajectory of Church Reform and
Renewal*

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How to cite:

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Ecclesiology in a time of Institutional Diminishment: The Paschal Trajectory of Church Reform and Renewal

Adam James O'Taylor

Abstract

This study seeks to articulate a constructive theology of ecclesial change in contexts of institutional decline. It considers how paradigmatic the full arc of the paschal mystery should be (notably, through death) for an ecclesiology of institutional diminishment. It then explores whether this is appropriately appreciated in contemporary Catholic diocesan reform and renewal efforts.

For at least fifty years, British society has been experiencing a process of religious transformation, often labelled secularisation. Notwithstanding the exact nature of this change, what is not disputed, but much less systematically theorised and explored, is that most institutional churches are under significant organisational strain. This strain is requiring them to change how they operate substantially; most often they are diminishing and, in some forms, are dying. Taking both theological and historical perspectives, this should not necessarily be a cause for concern. However, it calls for understanding. This thesis examines such change theologically, within the Catholic Church in England and Wales.

Following a literature review, it begins by outlining key principles for material change within the Church, following the work of Karl Rahner. It then explores the merits of a paschal ecclesiology with Hans Urs von Balthasar, as well as further work from Rahner on death. With these perspectives, it analyses the sufficiency of pastoral approaches to change followed by over half of Catholic dioceses in England and Wales in the period 2005-2019, as outlined in their publicly available restructuring plans. The conclusion discusses the extent to which, pressing beyond the occasionally used idea of 'dark night', the full paschal process of passion, death, and resurrection (a process so often extolled at the level of the individual believer) offers ecclesiological and practical clues for the journey ahead.

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MA Thesis

April 2020

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List of Abbreviations

- MP** Balthasar, Hans Urs von. *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990.
- Wintry Season** Rahner, Karl, Paul Imhof, Hubert Biallowons, and Harvey D. Egan. *Faith in a Wintry Season: Conversations and Interviews with Karl Rahner in the Last Years of His Life*. New York: Crossroad, 1990.
- On Death** Rahner, Karl. *On the Theology of Death*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1972.
- I Remember** Rahner, Karl. *I Remember: An Autobiographical Interview with Meinold Krauss*. Edited by Meinold Krauss. London: SCM, 1984.
- Question** Rahner, Karl. "The Question of the Future." In *Theological Investigations; 12*, edited by David Bourke. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974.
- Changeable** Rahner, Karl. "Basic Observations on the Subject of Changeable and Unchangeable Factors in the Church." In *Theological Investigations; 14*, edited by David Bourke. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976.
- Future Church** Rahner, Karl. "The Future of the Church and the Church of the Future." In *Theological Investigations; 20*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981.
- Structural** Rahner, Karl. "Structural Change in the Church of the Future." In *Theological Investigations; 20*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981.

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Acknowledgements

I submit this with a good number of people to thank. Firstly, I am indebted to Paul Murray and Karen Kilby who supervised the work and whose writing, teaching and pastoral support I have benefited from enormously in the last two years. The whole Centre for Catholic Studies community and Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University has also been a wonderful home. Many staff and students have been good companions on this journey, ever generous with encouragement and gentle with my frequent ignorance.

Thank you to the funders who covered my course fees: the Lay Training Fund of the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, as well as the Institute of Our Lady of Mercy in the form of a Catherine McAuley Bursary. I write in the hope of drawing forth treasures old and new and very much appreciated your helping hand along the way.

To Jeroen Hoogland, Lya Vollerling, and the Passionist community at Minsteracres: I am grateful for much friendship over this time and also the perfect writing environment for some of these ideas to take root. Gardens (and silence) are good for reflections about life and death. Many thanks also to the organisations I have worked alongside during this time, charitable and religious orders, who have allowed me to deepen my reflections about some of these ideas in practice.

To those I briefly interviewed and have spoken to over the years about diocesan processes, thank you too. You helped draw back the veil from the documents I was buried in and it was much appreciated. Though I have written sometimes critically, I hope to have done so as a friend, acknowledging too the challenges which dioceses face at the moment. In my professional life I have wrestled with death and closed down programmes and organisations, but yet have also tried to keep alive that which is dearest to me and been most unwilling to recognise a changed reality and perhaps a new call from God. I know how institutions are not at all built to imagine their own ending and I do not know if I would in practice have the courage to press some of the ideas I advocate in this writing. I am in awe of the hope-filled and generous nature some of the processes I have studied; thank you for much to grapple with.

I am conscious of having not written in depth about any women theologians. The fault is my own and a regrettable one, especially so in some of the gendered language that emerges from the historical theologians. Rahner and Balthasar ended up best for the topic at the time, but, along with a theology of liberation, I have resolved to address this imbalance if I ever write about change, which involves resistance and struggle, in the Church again.

I am conscious too of having written mainly of Jesuits. To them and an appreciation of the Spiritual Exercises I am in debt. The topics for this thesis were born during my time as a Jesuit novice and at St Beuno's. Thank you to my fellow 30-day retreatant who posted a birthday card under my door one day and brought the words "Jesus set his face for Jerusalem" to the fore of my prayer and reflections. The words confirmed in me a movement which I have wrestled with in recent years and lie at the heart of the challenges posed here. In a similar vein, I'd like to thank too those who gave me an historical education. The questions of this thesis were born from an historical quest, wondering why writing about the Church in the 1970s looked like it could be transposed directly to today – I hope to have found at least clues to some answers here.

And finally, thank you to my family and friends but above all to Florence. Flo, you are always some many theological and spiritual steps ahead of me and though I'm pleased to be submitting this writing of my own I look forward more to being around for what you produce in the coming years.

Introduction

1. To dust we shall return

At an Ash Wednesday service the priest marks the foreheads of the faithful with ashes in the sign of the cross, accompanied traditionally by words, based on Genesis 3:19, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Death is brought to the fore; starting their Lenten journey, each person is reminded of the fate of their earthly body. Yet not just this form of death. Also apt for the day are some words of Karl Barth, who in a Pauline echo,¹ takes us beyond material, bodily death and writes: “Confronted by Jesus, men must die, they must die daily ... so long as they have not surrendered or have ceased to surrender all security and every concrete ground of comfort, in order that they may be saved by grace only – they must be mortified.”²

What might we conclude reflecting upon this about our collective life in the Church? Is there any reason why the Church's nature means that it escapes its own return to dust or need for mortification? By no means. Reform, which for now we can elide with mortification, is a common refrain in Church history. Moreover, a trip around northern England provides plenty of evidence of a Church that in material terms often undergoes a kind of death. The ruins of Finchale Priory, Fountains Abbey, Tynemouth Priory, Lindisfarne Priory are only kept from disintegration through the actions of English Heritage and the National Trust. Taking a wider lens, St Paul's church at Corinth no longer exists, St Augustine's church at Carthage is no more. There are plenty of instances in which part of the Church has returned to dust, raised to new life elsewhere, or in a different time. God's action in the world in one period did not, in these institutional instances, last until the next.

Such histories are in mind for us here. If you take a long enough timeframe, or a wide enough geographical scope, we may be reassured of the Church's material presence throughout history; the transcendent Body of Christ finds incarnate expression at all times. However, as the Church goes through changes, what is to be our role in this? What too is an appropriate ecclesiology of material change and how do we contend with the

¹ See, for example, Romans 8: 4-13; Galatians 2: 20 (NRSV).

² Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1933), 108.

death of individual expressions of the Church? Furthermore, if an institutional church is in decline, might we need to find ways to live its death well, whilst in a time of health and material growth attend also to Barth's insistence on mortification, framed this time within an ecclesial setting?

Such questions about the Church seem particularly pressing now. Despite fears in recent decades, we have not seen the Death of God and nor have we seen the death of the Church. However, for at least fifty years, British society has been experiencing a process of religious transformation which is often labelled secularisation.³ Notwithstanding the exact nature of these changes, what is not disputed, but much less systematically theorised and explored, is that most institutional churches are currently under significant organisational strain. This strain is requiring them to change how they operate substantially; starkly, they are very often suffering, diminishing and, in some forms, are dying. This thesis will study what this means theologically within the Catholic tradition. Rooted in contemporary practice, but not framing itself as a piece of practical theology, it will analyse the sufficiency of current systematic and pastoral approaches to decline. In particular it will look at the work of Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar, as well as the publicly available restructuring plans of English and Welsh Catholic dioceses. Following through an idea that does not seem to be explored in any depth in the academic literature, it will explore the extent to which, pressing beyond the occasionally used idea of 'dark night', the full paschal process of passion, death, and resurrection (so often, again, extolled at the level of the individual believer) offers ecclesiological and practical clues as to the journey ahead. In contrast to much contemporary reform and renewal work, it will unpack an idea suggested in the ecumenical movement that the future for the Church as the Body of Christ will involve "nothing less than a death and rebirth of many forms of church life as we have known them".⁴ It will try to offer new ways forward to a Church that in many settings often faces despair, as it struggles to respond with hope to what may seem like death by a thousand cuts.

³ For a good overview see Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto, *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* (Routledge, 2012).

⁴ From the statement of The World Council of Churches, New Delhi Assembly 1961, quoted in: Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *In One Body Through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity. A Call to the Churches from an Ecumenical Study Group* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004), 22.

2. This moment in the history of the Church

Though sociological concerns will not dominate the discussion, driving this analysis are acute, contemporary challenges for Christian churches in British, Western European and generally 'Western' cultures. For this study, outlined most fully in Chapter Four, these challenges come in the form of falling communal participation and institutional decline, defined by nearly all commonly accepted organisational metrics. The causes are hard to pinpoint but the consequences are numerous: the closure of parishes, failing finances, priests stretched far beyond human capacity, there being too few people to carry out what are seen as essential pastoral ministries (either because of lack of funds to pay stipends or too few vocations to the priesthood). In Britain, if there was ever a perceived sense of Christendom, we are far from that now. The picture is slightly different across Protestant denominations and the Catholic Church, but, excepting pockets that buck the trend, the broad outlines of the narrative are the same: people are not attending churches as much, and institutions are having to make significant changes to their practices to function and survive. Crucially, this does not necessarily mean that belief levels have declined, but there is no avoiding the fact that the institutions of many churches are under stress.⁵ Blame is levelled across the divide: some argue that churches have conformed too much to secular culture and are no longer prophetically different, others that they have failed woefully to 'keep up with the times'.⁶ The intensity with which such discussions are often carried out across denominations can leave little room for doubt about the centrality of some of the topics under consideration.

To explore these issues, Catholicism in Britain provides a good case study. Many Catholic dioceses are currently undergoing significant rationalisation programmes to cut their number of parish churches markedly, in some cases at least by half. Beyond churchgoing, traditional religious life is also in full-scale retreat: orders are closing, apostolic works are being wrapped-up or handed to others. In the academic world, the Jesuits' closure of Heythrop is less a bellwether than *The Last Post*; it hands university-level Catholic education in the UK almost entirely into the stewardship of lay hands. There is not

⁵ There is healthy sociological and historical debate about what secularisation means, how, when and even whether it has come about, and how the nature of religious belief is changing. This will not be the focus of this thesis, however. For key discussions see: *Redefining Christian Britain: post 1945 Perspectives*, ed. Jane Garnett et al. (London: SCM Press, 2006).

⁶ A good summary of the main debates can be found in: James Keane, "The Uncertain Future of Catholic Ireland," *America Magazine*, February 23 2018, <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2018/02/23/uncertain-future-catholic-ireland> [accessed 17 March 2020].

necessarily a problem with this, but it marks a definite historical transition. Long gone and a distant memory too are the days of the 1950s and before, when religious orders and dioceses built theologates that could house hundreds of men in training for ordination. The ruins of St Peter's Seminary, Cardross, and the former junior seminary at Ushaw College, County Durham stand as vivid monuments to such changes; they signal at least one type of death which will be of interest here.

Setting aside normative judgement for a moment, there are of course green shoots and signs of institutional growth throughout churches: one might point to the charismatic renewal in the Catholic Church, or the growth of evangelical churches and *Fresh Expressions* within the Church of England. These movements remain an essential part of the story even if, as we will see, it is important not to equate uncritically that which is new with desirable growth. However, save a miraculous revival of institutional fortunes in the coming years, the overall story remains one of institutional decline. To take Hexham and Newcastle Diocese's own analysis, in fifteen years there will be 50 active priests, down from 350 in the early 1950s, and recorded Mass attendance is down over 60% in the past twenty years.⁷

So much then is clear: the shape of the institutional Church to come in certain contexts will be significantly smaller. Perhaps this should be still of no great concern. Some see a remnant Church as a welcome way ahead for the faith; they would argue that the idea of reaching for Christendom was always a work of arrogance, a Tower of Babel of our own.⁸ One's ecclesiology too, might find much comfort in the growth of certain non-denominational congregations. Yet the changes do seem to call for theological explanation. The institutional decline which the Church now faces is historically unique, at least in the modern era, and strategic responses are often speculative. What is God's invitation to the institutional Church in this time?

As will be seen, there do not appear to be any systematic studies that comprehensively theologise the nature of the process unfolding. For a Catholic Church that sees itself as successor to the apostolic tradition this is of particular concern. The Catholic Church

⁷ *Diocesan Facts and Figures*, Hexham and Newcastle Diocese, 2015.

⁸ Pointing towards this, for example, is Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come* (London: S.P.C.K., 1974). A contemporary argument can be found in Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017).

cannot, as yet theologically, just look to new, growing expressions of churches or spirituality and wish them well on their way as it turns out the lights. Moreover, though Catholicism is our primary area of interest here, these questions are hugely significant to other denominations at various stages of growth and decline. As one American theologian has claimed “Modern Evangelicalism has no theological room for seeing God in a shrinking church.”⁹

3. From kenotic to paschal ecclesiology

With death and possible new life surrounding these contemporary changes, the key field of our analysis will be the significance of the paschal story in the life of Christian institutions. The preliminary thesis is that if material decay, death, and the consequences of sin and evil remain with the world, then cross, death and resurrection, which form an essential part of the journey for individual believers, should also offer a more regularly-used hermeneutical lens for the organisational Church's development. In Chapters Three and Four, I therefore examine whether the full arc of the paschal mystery must, however reluctantly, be at times courageously accepted by the institutional Church, and argue that contemporary Church reform and renewal efforts seek to their detriment to avoid this. I will consider whether claims that the Church will undergo or is already undergoing resurrection, without acknowledging past or future paschal death are at the risk of being at best naively optimistic and at worst hopelessly un-Christian. I will argue that the language of current reform and renewal efforts is almost entirely un-cruciform and will wonder the extent to which this already proves or could prove one of their essential flaws, ending up too often merely managerial and not transformational in Christ.

To flag early possible pitfalls, I will not, however, posit that the Church as the body of Christ should eagerly desire its own imminent death and disappearance. Gethsemane will not suddenly disappear, and the ideas developed here should not, for example, be crassly used to justify the closure of churches prematurely. Yet I will explore whether there is still a paschal imperative: that just as individuals need to die to themselves to be released to new life, so the church needs to do likewise; and that, beyond mortification, perhaps the Church needs at times to be willing to accept and somewhat reluctantly walk towards

⁹ Quoted from A.J. Swoboda, *Procreation, Proselytism, and Church Growth: Developing a Theology of Church Decline*, November 27 2013, <http://www.missionalliance.org/procreation-proselytism-and-church-growth-developing-a-theology-of-church-decline/> [accessed 17 March 2020].

a material death of its current life. Crucially though too, the paschal process (if it can be characterised as a process at all) cannot be controlled; this thesis does not aim to be yet another attempt to take control of God's mysterious, salvific work in creation.

To set this in a recently explored theological context, as will be seen in Chapter One, other writers have provisionally explored some of these ideas through the lens of *kenosis*. However, the thesis will largely steer clear of the conception. Kenosis seems both too passive for our topic and its adoption has also at times been too masochistic. Some theologians, too, are at risk of an unhealthy glorification of the suffering of the cross (including Balthasar to whom we are turning). Jesus Christ is kenotic, taking the form of a slave (Philippians 2:7) but he is also infinitely more than that. There is very little of the Christ of the gospels that is only kenotic. In Linn Tonstad's conception, for example, who has one of the most fully worked out discussions of this topic:

The Son's road to the cross cannot be straight: It cannot be reduced to (self)sacrifice or expiation. He has too many tasks to do on the way: friends to make, disciples to call, wine to drink, people to heal, demons to drive out.¹⁰

As we will see, whilst a paschal ecclesiology will have much sympathy with some of the principles of the kenoticists, there will be crucial differences in the necessary agency ascribed to Christ, people and the Church.

4. Structure and outline methodology

To conclude this introduction, we offer some reflections as to the structure of the work. Chapter One will explore the key literature available to a Catholic Church in diminishment, focusing on theological resources, but with regard also to pastoral-ecclesial and extra-ecclesial sources which are relevant to the discussion. The main task here will be investigative, exploring whether there are underappreciated and underdeveloped areas of the literature, or imperfect connections made between systematic and pastoral theology. Given the under-researched nature of this topic, the chapter will be wide-ranging and high-level in approach, opening up to deeper analytical work in key areas later in the study.

¹⁰ Linn Marie Tonstad, *God and Difference: the Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 244.

Noting that diminishment is just one form of institutional change, in Chapter Two we will explore a generalised model for ecclesial change using Karl Rahner's work. Analysing some of his lesser-discussed writings, we will explore his views on pastoral planning and key principles for approaching change within the Church. This will open up the way to consideration of paschal concerns, but not address them directly.

Bringing paschal concerns into view we will therefore look in Chapter Three at the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, particularly *Mysterium Paschale*. This will be supplemented by further discussion of Rahner's theological ideas concerning death. It is here that the main constructive theological work will take place, drawing out of both theologians a way in which we might understand the death of the Church constructively, yet steering far clear of glorifying suffering.

Finally, in a substantial change of tone and approach, looking at contemporary approaches to this situation, we will code and analyse the publicly available literature from current reform and renewal efforts across seventeen Catholic Dioceses in England and Wales. Having assessed the merits of a paschal ecclesiology, I will explore the extent to which these diocesan efforts use the paschal mystery as a developmental narrative or hermeneutic for setting their strategy. In the event, such ideas will be found to be almost entirely lacking and I will draw out the beginnings of an implied theology of institutional church decline operating within dioceses, exploring possible weaknesses.

The Conclusion will point towards areas in contemporary pastoral planning which require more robust theological attention. Detailed pastoral prognoses will not be given. However, as will be seen, there is much that appears missing in current approaches and it seems essential that much more is done in this area. The Church will always be with us, but clearly the Church of one hundred years' time will not look in many respects like the Church of today. What wineskins does the Church need for the next years of its history? What shall we do with our treasure in earthen vessels? What, more specifically, shall we do with our current earthen vessels? All these considerations will be in mind as we conclude with thoughts about how the Church and churches might approach this particular moment most fully alive in Christ.

Chapter 1: The bookshelves of a changing Church

1. Sociological context and the nature of the institutional Church

This study is complemented by a localised sociological narrative about the state of institutional churches in Britain. The typical account sees churches broadly diminishing across all key regularly recorded criteria; in particular for our purposes this is the case within Catholicism in England and Wales, but also in Western Europe and North America more generally.¹¹ In Britain, literature on the subject is extensive and updated regularly by key commentators.¹² More supporting evidence and colour will be given to the experience of the Catholic Church in England and Wales within Chapter Four. I do not, however, making plain the starting point, seriously challenge the story usually told.

Nevertheless, as we begin it is worth noting that what we mean when we talk about the Church is of course not straightforward. Church is an ambiguous word, as Walter Kasper discusses in his *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality and Mission*.¹³ In describing the state of the Church, we certainly do not want to be subject to a numbers game and entirely skate over important concepts of the Church as mystical communion, sacrament or otherwise. In certain conceptions, the Church cannot perhaps be ultimately diminished. However, though we may have a challenge relating the Church as, for example, the communion of saints to its institutional form in even the most minimal of social and legal structures, nevertheless a basic sociological analysis can and should be made, regardless of denomination.¹⁴ In a Catholic self-conception of Church this is inescapable; we must include in our understanding institutions such as the parish, sacraments and priests, the instance of which can be measured directly.

¹¹ The key criteria would include: Mass attendance, number of marriages, baptisms, funerals, number of churches and parishes, number of priests, and levels of vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

¹² The picture is traced by those such as Linda Woodhead, Grace Davie, Peter Brierley, Stephen Bullivant, through nationally published statistics by the government and church denominations, is frequently discussed in the religious and national press.

¹³ Walter Kasper, *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality and Mission* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

Kasper writes:

The understanding of Church as advocated in Catholic and Orthodox theology ... interprets the visible, institutionally tangible form of the Church as sign and instrument of what the Church essentially is in its spiritual reality.¹⁵

For the purposes of this study, therefore, if we are seeing declining numbers of parishes, priests and within sacramental life, we can certainly say that the Church, as seen through one lens, a fundamental lens too, is diminishing, or at least in serious need of redefining its contemporary “signs and instruments”. From this standpoint, the key questions of this study flow.¹⁶

Aware though of a particular, perhaps pessimistic lens dominating discussions, David Goodhew, writing about Church growth, has some important words of warning. He argues that “many contemporary British theologians, church leaders and churches have consciously or unconsciously internalized both the secularization thesis and its eschatology of decline, thereby creating an ecclesiology of fatalism.”¹⁷ He posits how theology in the contemporary West “has encouraged a ‘decline theology’ in which numerical church growth is seen as impossible and even undesirable”.¹⁸ We will not examine here whether the claims he makes are accurate, but his sense of an eschatology of decline or hopelessness is certainly something we want to avoid.¹⁹

Nevertheless, a Church both in a process of diminishment and diminished, represents a particular historical context from which to respond and relate. Therefore, taking the sociological story as a backdrop, were you a bishop, on a bishop’s staff team, a parishioner, a theologian, a provincial of a religious order, or in charge of another organisation within Church structures, how might you approach this particular moment and to where might you turn?

¹⁵ Ibid., 41.

¹⁶ It might be asked whether our questions should hold not only in a period of institutional diminishment. As will be explored in the next chapter, perhaps much less important and interesting to consider is not how the church materially changes when diminishing but how it changes in general. An ecclesiology which has something to say to the church in all sociological contexts will be richer than one which is only able to attend to one reality. We go some way to discussing this in the study, though cannot hope to be comprehensive.

¹⁷ David Goodhew, *Church Growth in Britain: 1980 to the Present* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 18-19.

¹⁸ David Goodhew, *Towards a Theology of Church Growth* (London: Routledge, 2015), 4.

¹⁹ Moreover, we need to bear in mind that the sociological story can only tell us about the current moment and projected trends but is not definitive about future trajectory.

2. A range of approaches

The questions in this study remain explicitly theological. Yet our review of literature needs to go far beyond explicitly theological sources, whilst not pretending that it will be possible to be comprehensive. Most especially, in looking at diocesan restructuring plans, it is important to have a sense of the sources to which authors have turned, which more often than not fall outside the realm of academic theology. The relative importance of any of these sources to the dioceses cannot easily be ascertained within the confines of this work; yet it is worthwhile having all approaches in mind as there is certainly no authoritative 'reader' that deals with a church in diminishment. This area of Church practice is both emergent and experimental; a review follows, at times brief, which therefore covers all key sources, diagnosing, in particular, gaps in the realm of academic theology.²⁰

Literature can be grouped into three types: that which originates within a context which is explicitly theological and written primarily for the academy or from a predominantly theoretical standpoint; secondly, that which is pastoral-ecclesial, whether Catholic or not;²¹ thirdly, that which comes from an academic tradition other than theology, or has heuristic significance for our theme but only through analogy and association. What will emerge is a breadth but rarely a depth. Notably, very little literature tries to understand the situation of a diminishing church theologically, an absence which various commentators occasionally point towards. Furthermore, no works attend to the types of diocesan restructuring and renewal plans that we are exploring. This suggested gap, makes way for the chapters which follow.

²⁰ There are some key themes largely excluded from the review. Firstly, as noted, sociological. Secondly, nearly all pastoral and missiological work is excluded. Though there is much this could teach us about how to approach a period of diminishment (e.g., a range of literature on inculturation or kerygmatic approaches in modern society) and that work is certainly properly theological, it rarely contends directly with our examination of diocesan approaches to change and the paschal mystery. Thirdly, we do not explore much biblical studies work that would be relevant to our topic. Mostly this is owing to a certain preference of theological approach, but also because, whilst diocesan plans root themselves in certain preferred, mainly Gospel verses, they do not engage in extended biblical explorations (perhaps to their detriment one could argue separately).

²¹ This is inevitably a slightly artificial division, especially as theologians adopt a broad range of styles and have both 'academic' as well as 'more popular' writing, but hopefully it will be accepted.

3. Theological sources

Though when we explore the diocesan materials relevant to this study, formal theological reflection will be found to have been relatively rarely employed by authors (bishops and their teams), having a sense of the broad landscape, even if often ignored, seems crucial.

This cannot be comprehensive, however, and there is some inevitable challenge of weighing the merits of the various ways up the mountain. An ecumenist could certainly argue that diminishment of the Church is related to its division and brokenness and contend that a way back to Church health is to overcome such divisions. Another theologian might point to the Church's issues as manifestations of the consequences of its own sinfulness. In fact, encompassing both these issues, this is the approach taken at times by Ephraim Radner in his "figural ecclesiology".²² Issues to do with the authority, governance and theologies of ministry might emerge as crucial for another commentator. Therefore, though we will touch on various viewpoints, we will not ultimately be able to assess whether one theological viewpoint is more important than all others, no more than a group of doctors, priests, psychologists and academics, could 'make perfect' or attend to all the ills in the human body. Our task is more limited: trying to understand the nature of diminishment more generally, the relevance of the paschal mystery in that context, and looking at sources which may inform contemporary processes of diocesan planning.

The conclusion will be that many theological commentators have something interesting to say about our questions. However, again, none systematically apply such thinking to the types of diocesan restructuring processes we are studying here. Nor do any sustain a discourse about the paschal mystery in this context. This perhaps can only be diagnosed as an absence, but as we will seek to show in Chapter Three one that crucially needs attending to in such a sociological context as we currently face in the Church.

Characterising the Church of today and tomorrow

For two works which set the tone of analysis we can look at Joseph Ratzinger's *Faith and the Future* and Karl Rahner's *The Shape of the Church to Come*, both written in the early 1970s.²³ Both are excellent in diagnosing the Church's ills and imagining a possible future.

²² Ephraim Radner, *Church* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2017), 122-3. Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: a Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998).

²³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Faith and the Future* (Chicago, IL: Franciscan Herald Press, 1971); Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come*.

Diminishment is clearly part of that trajectory; Ratzinger summarises the journey for the Church as follows:

From the crisis of today the Church of tomorrow will emerge — a Church that has lost much. She will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning. She will no longer be able to inhabit many of the edifices she built in prosperity. As the number of her adherents diminishes, so it will lose many of her social privileges.²⁴

Rahner has similar themes, as we will explore in the next Chapter. However, lacking for our purpose is that neither gives much indication as to how the Church walks the journey between the two worlds of today (the 1970s) and tomorrow. Paschal analysis is, moreover, lacking in both works and so whilst they offer much as a backdrop and are remarkably prophetic at times, their positions need developing. Someone designing diocesan plans at the moment or a developing an ecclesiology of diminishment would find much in them to draw upon (as one diocesan planner commented to me in person), but nothing that quite addresses the questions at hand.

Tradition and reforming the Church literature

Perhaps then the widest ranging literature at our disposal is that which looks at concepts of reform in the Church more generally. Diminishment is, after all, just one type of change. Rahner's work on change in the church, which will become the focus of our next chapter, or others who write about the development of doctrine, would be included alongside each other here. Having found much in Rahner of value, the next chapter will return to this literature in more detail.

However, another useful framing comes from those who use concepts of tradition as their key lens. Yves Congar is central here and Gabriel Flynn writes of Congar's desire to help the Church contend with a new situation of unbelief in mid-twentieth century Europe. His particular concern, most fully worked out in *Vrai et fausse réforme dan l'Église* is to contribute to renewal and reform, adhering to tradition without leading to schism, integrating the renewing work of Mohler, Newman and others from the nineteenth

²⁴ Ratzinger, *Faith and the Future*, 116-17.

century.²⁵ Congar's concepts are certainly valuable to us; he outlines a view of tradition which "comprises...not only doctrines but things: the sacraments, ecclesiastical institutions..."²⁶ Flynn notes too how Congar's life itself took on paschal qualities, with frequent periods of darkness and experiences of censure.²⁷ However, his purpose is somewhat different to that being explored here (over half a century divides us now as well), and as for so many of our authors he does not attend in depth to matters of church planning, nor the paschal mystery. Nevertheless, Phillip Rosemann's analysis, building on Congar, is also worth bringing to the fore, especially as themes of death and destruction enter our questions. Exploring Congar's characterisation of tradition, Rosemann sees too much of a focus on continuity; rupture or discontinuity being not at all attended to. Developing thinking around the forgetfulness of tradition, the way in which layers upon layers of thinking can hide the wisdom of earlier ages, and the way in which "destruction" or "unbuilding" might be required to return to the radical root of tradition, Rosemann is clearly developing analysis in line with our topic.²⁸ Such ideas will resonate as we begin to develop constructive thoughts in Chapter Three.

Pneumatological approaches

Thinking pneumatologically, James Dunn has an instructive line of argument for our topic. In a short essay, he explores how a model for renewal within the church is often taken to be solely about individual renewal, with the communal merely seen as the multiplication of renewed individuals. However, he writes that we need to supplement "the model of individual spirituality with a model of communal spirituality" and goes on to explore the corporate operation of the Spirit's grace, how it flows and where it breathes life. Drawing Christological and pneumatological together, he argues that whilst the Spirit moves communally, it is seen to be the Spirit only if its movement is characterised/patterned by the way of Christ. What this means specifically, and beginning to touch heavily on our theme, is that "the model for our present experience of Christ is not the glorified Christ, but the suffering, crucified Christ."²⁹ Led by Paul's writings and transposing this thinking to the Church, Dunn continues:

²⁵ Gabriel Flynn, *Yves Congar's Vision of the Church in a World of Unbelief* (Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate, 2004), 6.

²⁶ Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 13ff.

²⁷ Flynn, *Yves Congar's Vision of the Church in a World of Unbelief*, 10.

²⁸ Phillip Rosemann, *Charred Root of Meaning: Continuity, Transgression, and the Other in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018).

²⁹ James D. G. Dunn, *The Christ and the Spirit: collected essays of James D. G. Dunn*, vol. 2: *Pneumatology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 350,51.

Paul had to stress that union with Christ is union with Christ in his death... So too with Christians in their corporate identity: the church is indeed the continuation of the incarnation if we mean by that that the church continues to embody the weakness and suffering which Christ endured in his passion.³⁰

A short chapter covers rich ground, concluding that “if there are features of our corporate life which have the mark of death about them, what else do the followers of the crucified expect?” entreating that our corporate life should look as much like Good Friday as Easter Sunday.³¹ In particular he presses for a model of Church which is built for “one generation”, with more of the eschatological fervour that would have characterised the Church in its first two centuries. However, on the topic of the cross, he leaves some room for further exploration. The following is the most explicit in developing thinking of which we would want to be wary; its tone mirrors some of the weaknesses of the *kenosis* literature which we explore below. Dunn:

Ought our congregations to be together looking at our church structures to check which features of their corporate life ought to be allowed, nay encouraged, to die, even be put to death in the hope of the resurrection to life?³²

Whilst the argument seems congruent with the reasoning before, it takes a subtle, but crucial, wrong turn. The language of ‘put to death’ raises the most cause for concern. Church congregations should not be taking on the role of Church executioners one feels. The wariness to such language here mirrors concerns of a willed suffering on the part of Christ or the believer, rather than a necessary but nevertheless undesired Crucifixion. We will see more of this when looking at issues to do with *kenosis* below. Nevertheless, on many fronts Dunn’s challenges appear instructive and it is a shame that his thoughts do not seem more fully developed. We will try to take the thinking a little further in Chapter Three.

³⁰ Ibid., 352.

³¹ Ibid., 356.

³² Ibid.

Dark Night

Another regularly used hermeneutical lens for the Church today is that of the 'dark night', drawing particularly on John of the Cross. Commentators use this in different ways and for varied issues within the Church. Mary Grey, for example, writes in a context of "alienation, exclusion from power and authority" for so many, but particularly attentive to a Church which so many young people have left.³³ The image for her represents both a period in which Christ appears absent from the Church, but also a space in which something is being born which requires a different disposition. Theodora Hawksley too counsels us to use John to explore ways in which "God's hand might be equally at work in dryness and distaste as sensible consolation".³⁴ Perhaps the most personal perspective is given in a foreword by Aidan Nichols O.P. (who also translates and introduces *Mysterium Paschale*) to writings of Geoffrey Preston O.P., clearly relevant to our topic:

Geoffrey used to repeat a remark which the Carmelite nuns of Quiddendam in Norfolk once made to him. St John of the Cross... is well-known for his use of the metaphor of the Dark Night to express our relationship with God. The image brings out the painfully obscure character of all authentic growth in holiness. ... The Carmelites once suggested to Geoffrey that in our time in the Church the dark night of St John of the Cross is no longer a purely personal, purely individual, experience. Instead, they said, it falls on people as a *corporate* experience, a corporate experience of the Church in the midst of secularism, theological disquiet and doubt, and the collapse of the sense of God³⁵

³³ Mary C. Grey, *Beyond the Dark Night: A Way Forward for the Church?* (London: Cassell, 1997), vii-viii, 1.

³⁴ Theodora Hawksley, *The Dark Night of the Church: St John of the Cross in Conversation with Voices from the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland*, Unpublished, 2013. Hawksley has an interesting perspective here, which explores the concept in more depth: "In the decline of Irish mass-going, the continued low levels of vocations to religious life and the priesthood, and the church's loss of respect and status following the abuse crisis they find, as John says of the soul in darkness, 'dryness and distaste because of a lack of the gratification it formerly enjoyed'. From 'sensible consolations' in the church's life – high mass attendance, high numbers of vocations – prophetic responses are inclined to draw the conclusion that the church is doing something right. From experiences of 'dryness and distaste' – loss of status or influence – they are inclined to draw the conclusion that the church is doing something wrong. John's principle of refraining from judgement about sensible consolations in prayer might help us to question some of these assumptions, encouraging those engaged in prophetic responses to the abuse crisis to discern whether God's hand might be equally at work in dryness and distaste as sensible consolation, whether our understandings of sensible consolations in the life of the church are adequate - whether, in short, we are as prepared to see God's purposes in the cross as in the resurrection."

³⁵ Geoffrey Preston and Aidan Nichols, *Hallowing the Time: Meditations on the Cycle of the Christian Liturgy* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980), x. Also: "Geoffrey's personal crisis was in its own way a paradigm of that of the whole church in his lifetime. It involved asking, and asking extremely persistently, the question which has governed Christian life, and particular the life of the Christian religious, at all turning-points. Where is God to be found?" My thanks to Ann Swailes for pointing me towards Preston's writing.

However, though we might like to see this thinking taken further, in Preston and Grey the image is used evocatively rather than explored systematically. Grey's writing is specifically concerned with *beyond* the dark night and outlining the "epiphanies of grace" which she notices in the contemporary Church.³⁶ The idea also does not seem to be explored in Preston's writings in any depth, though his writings on liturgy and baptism may offer fruits if explored further. Hawksley is a little more useful, but also requires deepening for our own purposes. Finally, though not a charge to level at these authors, we would also want to be careful in describing any period as the "dark night". Such an image should not be attached to all periods of suffering or God's apparent absence. Nevertheless, the image and spirituality appear to resonate, and it is therefore interesting to note for now just how little such imagery appears in the diocesan plans we will explore.

Kenosis, Suffering

Drawing out some of these themes further, brings us to a literature concerned with *kenosis* and suffering. Donald MacKinnon's work provides much for us to attend to. Coming directly to our paschal theme, Rowan Williams writes of MacKinnon how his work brings us to a need to learn "how to hope beyond any refusal to face the darkness of the cross or any pessimism that cannot see the cross in the light of the resurrection".³⁷ Writing in a slightly different context, more concerned with power, MacKinnon goes straight to our questions in hand: "[t]he theological reading of the history of the Church is inevitably a *theologia crucis*".³⁸ He continues elsewhere: "It may indeed be that the church need be open to the risk of failure, the failure that is crucifixion, and a failure that is not simply and glibly overridden by resurrection."³⁹ How we might develop this for diocesan planning today will be something taken up in Chapter Three. To signal one area of exploration and debate, MacKinnon's theology is dubbed kenotic by Connor.⁴⁰ However, as we noted earlier, Tonstad is wary of such an approach, of the kenoticists "who find the love of God in self-emptying"⁴¹ and through a *theologia crucis* produce a trinitarian theology which "refuses to find God elsewhere than on the cross"⁴². For Tonstad, death is not overcome

³⁶ Grey, *Beyond the Dark Night: A Way Forward for the Church?*, 4.

³⁷ Donald M. MacKinnon, *Kenotic Ecclesiology: Select Writings of Donald M. MacKinnon* (Fortress Press, 2016), 12-13.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

³⁹ Donald M. MacKinnon, *God the Living and the True*, Signposts; 2, (London: Dacre Press, 1940), 160.

⁴⁰ Timothy G. Connor, *The Kenotic Trajectory of the Church in Donald MacKinnon's Theology: from Galilee to Jerusalem to Galilee* (London: T & T Clark, 2011).

⁴¹ Tonstad, *God and Difference: the Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude*, 19.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 46.

for these theologians but endlessly repeated in both history and as a central part of the trinitarian relationship. For example, she finds Balthasar's use of the idea of a "super-death", seemingly without reference to sin and the incarnation, as particularly shocking.⁴³ Suffering, in this model, is seen as somehow essential, producing a theodicy unexpectedly, that seeks to justify sacrifice and suffering in the world, rather than hoping that they might eventually be overcome. The same charge could perhaps be levelled at MacKinnon and our explorations of death and the paschal mystery will need not to glorify in them. Kilby is equally keen to address this issue:

Mourning, sadness, loss—none of these can be the last word, I think, in Christian theology. But without acknowledging that a loss really is a loss, that diminishment is not, in itself, a good, we may distort our capacity to think well. Without some recognition that these words capture something of the church's situation now, even if we don't believe they capture its very deepest truth or its final meaning—without this, there is a danger that an anxious nostalgia or a pugnacious self-assertion shapes our thought in general, and especially about the relationship of belief to unbelief.⁴⁴

We will want to reflect upon all this work further during Chapter Three when we try to develop constructive ideas for our purpose. Rowan Williams in some brief reflections which chime with our topic will make another appearance too.

Way of death - new life through death – Rahner and Balthasar

Coming closest to our theme then are Karl Rahner's theological reflections on death and Hans Urs von Balthasar's writings about the paschal mystery. Although Rahner's work considers individual deaths, there is much which we will be able to develop for an ecclesiological understanding of diminishment. He, as with our commentators, requires translating into our particular sociological context but Dunn's reflections earlier should help us see the usefulness of this. Rahner discusses death as "accomplishment" as "both an end and fulfilment" and helps us contend with the bodily nature of death, which we can certainly translate into our questions about material (rather than doctrinal) change within the Church. He discusses how death is present in all free acts and how we might

⁴³ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁴ Karen Kilby, *Belief, Unbelief and Mystery*. (Society for the Study of Theology Presidential Address, Unpublished, 2018).

share in the dying of Christ. How this could be useful will need to be explored further but combined with Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Mysterium Paschale*, it is here we will try to develop our constructive thoughts in Chapter Three. We find in Ephraim Radner much of resonance here also, in his joining the Church's mission to that of Israel, the offering of the Church as servant and renewal through martyrdom.⁴⁵ Requiring translation into Catholic context we will need to return to these themes in Chapter Three.

Church growth literature

Whilst many of our commentators are directly attempting to contend with the pain and suffering precipitated by diminishment, and at times with the cross, another body of work within the Anglican tradition approaches the Church's current context of decline with discussions of growth.⁴⁶ No such similar literature appears to exist in a Catholic context. The intent by authors is not to seek to understand the nature of diminishment but to put energies into understanding growth. It is certainly a reasonable response to dealing with a Church in this context and could be instructive for Catholics. Of greatest use for our own study, however, it offers some interesting perspectives in the way it often characterises growth.

David Goodhew writes to outline the approach: "The research in this volume suggests that churches and church leaders can let go of the secularization theory, its eschatology of decline and its ecclesiology of defeat."⁴⁷ More directly for our topic he goes on: "There has been resurrection, as well as death, across the British church in the three decades since 1980."⁴⁸ Croft is similarly confident: "We live in the time of the resurrection of the Son of God. The life of God's Spirit flows still in (often clogged) arteries of God's Church. It is primarily because of the faithfulness of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

⁴⁵ Radner, *The End of the Church: a Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 154-55. There are also a few other commentators who write specifically about paschal ecclesiology. See brief reflections in Waclaw Hryniewicz, *Our Hope: Christian Faith in Dialogue*, Polish Philosophical Studies VII (CRVP, 2007), 276-80. There seems much to complement the kenoticists and Dunn; this would merit deeper reflection in a wider study, though references are to works originally in Polish. Michael Ramsey's ecclesiology has also been referred to as paschal. See Ross Fishburn, 'Retrieving Michael Ramsey's Paschal Ecclesiology' (unpublished PhD thesis: Melbourne College of Divinity, Melbourne University, 2008).

⁴⁶ It would be interesting to explore concepts of pain and suffering in the process of growth as well though.

⁴⁷ David Goodhew, *Growth and Decline in the Anglican Communion: 1980 to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2017), 256.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

that we expect to see continual new life flowering in the life of the Church of England and our sister churches.”⁴⁹

These are key lines. Croft's hope is to be affirmed, certainly. However, whilst there is undoubtedly apparent new life in churches, is it, in Goodhew's conception, resurrectional? From whose perspective is it resurrectional? Something which looks like new life may not in fact be resurrectional, which suggests a working of God in a particularly grace-filled way, different somehow to new life which arises organically, or growth which looks like new life but is the swift sprouting of seeds on poor soil. Can there also be resurrection without a particular time of life-giving death? We note this only briefly for now. Such questions will be explored in more depth in Chapter Three. We must be careful, however, as with the dark night ideas of naming anything as God's work, when it may not be.

Theologies of contemporary religious life

Using almost polar opposite imagery to such Church growth literature, there is, penultimately, a theological literature around Catholic religious life which has something to offer too, covering issues such as death, crisis, chaos, hope for the future, opportunities for refounding.⁵⁰ Many of the works are based within the same sociological framing as our own study, with a sense of the Church and religious life in crisis.⁵¹ A variety of perspectives are offered. Barbara Fiand writes: “when paradigms collapse, the only creative thing to do is to let go, so that free space is created for the new to emerge”.⁵² Luisa Saffiotti, drawing on John of the Cross, suggests that we need a “cleansing of memory” and, again from Fiand that “we keep looking for the living among the dead and, as a consequence, the resurrection escapes us.”⁵³ Diarmuid O'Murchu's first book in 1980 is directly on our topic: *The Seed Must Die: Religious Life, Survival or Extinction*.⁵⁴ He writes elsewhere: “as we enter more deeply into the Calvary experience of diminishment

⁴⁹ Steven J. L. Croft, *The Future of the Parish System: Shaping the Church of England for the Twenty-first Century* (London: Church House, 2006), ix.

⁵⁰ For example see Gemma Simmonds, *A Future Full of Hope?* (Blackrock, Co. Dublin: Columba Press, 2012); Sandra Marie Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).

⁵¹ See Tony Flannery, *The Death of Religious Life?* (Blackrock, Co. Dublin: Columba Press, 1997); Luisa M. Saffiotti, *Moving Toward the Future: A Process* (2011) <http://www.mercymidatlantic.org/PDF/articles.pdf> [accessed 30 March 2020].

⁵² Quoted in Saffiotti, *Moving Toward the Future*.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Diarmuid O'Murchu, *The Seed Must Die: Religious Life, Survival or Extinction* (Veritas Dublin, 1980).

and decline, we also face the challenge of discerning and embracing the first seedlings of resurrection hope.”⁵⁵ A more systematic reading would be required to develop the theologies underlying these works. However, they do not develop into a more generalised ecclesiology which might translate immediately into our diocesan contexts. Similar to other modes of literature they too can sometimes be almost trite in their use of paschal and resurrection imagery. Nevertheless, such literature has informed the approach taken here. Grappling perhaps more immediately than many of our dioceses, with the real presence the death of organisations, this writing opens up a desire to explore these issues around the paschal mystery in more depth.

Associated ideas, biblical scholarship, sinfulness, pruning and refining

Concluding our theological discussions, there is a range of other literature on which one might draw, which would have something to say about the questions we are examining, but on which we can only touch in this study. Biblical explanations for collapse might discuss the Church’s sinfulness, but need to be used carefully. As Phillip Jenkins challenges, referring to a particular way in which the Church is ‘put to death’, we need to wonder whether we can “contemplate a God so rigid in his devotion for precise orthodoxy, as laid down in the fifth-century councils, that he would allow his mildly erring servants to suffer massacre, rape, and oppression.”⁵⁶ A variety of other approaches could also be taken, which have theological underpinnings. We might want to rediscover a tradition of lament as Walter Brueggeman entreats,⁵⁷ or explore a literature on the Church in desert and liminal spaces⁵⁸, or a Church in evolution.⁵⁹ None of these can be entirely ignored and we will find some resonance across the expanse of our diocesan literature, but we can only point towards them for now and indicate that none, when briefly inspected, seemed to quite meet the challenges of our particular topic.

⁵⁵ Diarmuid O’Murchu, *Religious Life in the 21st Century: The Prospect of Refounding* (Orbis, 2016), 2.

⁵⁶ Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: the Thousand-year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia - and How it Died* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 252.

⁵⁷ Amongst other places see Walter. Brueggemann, *Reality, grief, hope: three urgent prophetic tasks* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2014).

⁵⁸ See a good summary in Leonard Hjalmarson. *Forty Years in a Narrow Space* (Unpublished) <https://waytolead.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/liminal-space.pdf> [accessed 8 April 2020].

⁵⁹ See, for example, Ilia Delio, *Christ in Evolution* (New York: Orbis, 2008).

4. Pastoral-ecclesial sources

Official Church teaching

Moving from academic theological resources, within a Catholic ecclesial setting, the first place that one might be expected to turn in such a moment of diminishment is towards official church documentation. However, there is a relative paucity here in terms of an established literature. The key texts of Vatican II and some of Pope Francis' writings (*Evangelii Gaudium* in particular) make an appearance in the diocesan literature we will study and help us explore how to be Church in the modern world. All have a clear intent to tackle the place of the Church amidst a growing sense of unbelief in certain cultures or in a rapidly changing age. The documentation of certain religious orders also, for example from post-1950 General Congregations of the Society of Jesus, would likewise have a similar intent.⁶⁰ Papal documents in particular are well used by the dioceses being studied and are invaluable in restating the primacy for the Church of an encounter with the risen Christ, in understanding Pope Francis' recent way of proceeding and how that influences dioceses, his stress on discernment, his references to the sickness of the Church and imagery about the pilgrim people of God. Particular passages, as for example those listed at the start of the next chapter, acknowledge key concepts of relevance such as those surrounding "change" and "reform". However, they do not offer further commentary that could deeply shape the questions we are exploring here.⁶¹ No documents provide extensive theologically-rooted commentary on how to approach and understand the situation of a Church in diminishment, or which is changing more generally. No body of work originating from the Vatican, or conferences of Bishops, in any systematic way would answer the questions we are posing. It is a startling absence in some ways, especially given the number of dioceses undergoing similar processes worldwide, but an absence nonetheless.

Canon Law and related materials

Similar to general church teaching, Canon Law has some guidance that may be instructive but one finds nothing systematic or detailed. There is guidance as to how to close a church or reorder a parish,⁶² and the Vatican recently held a conference on church

⁶⁰ See, for example, GC31 Decree 3 on Atheism or GC35, Decree 3 on Challenges to Mission today. In John W. Padberg S.J., ed., *Jesuit Life & Mission Today: The Decrees and Accompanying Documents of the 31st–35th General Congregations of the Society of Jesus* (The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2009).

⁶¹ For more see Chapter Four

⁶² Referring to Canon Law 515 §1 and 2, see Tricia Colleen Bruce, *Parish and place: making room for diversity in the American Catholic church*, (Oxford: O.U.P., 2017), 75.

closure, aware of a growing need to establish what should happen when church buildings are deconsecrated (headline: try to avoid them being used for 'profane purposes' such as nightclubs and bars).⁶³ There also exist 'funeral liturgies' for church buildings and as Tricia Bruce has shown in the United States, a variety of parish forms (particularly the 'personal parish') have arisen in the last century to cope with changing pastoral needs.⁶⁴ In the context of religious orders, Constitutions are typically written for orders experiencing rapid growth; they are less well situated to provinces in decline, as witnessed by the challenge of combining diminishing provinces in Europe and North America in recent decades. However, guidance from canon law or within official church governance procedures is relatively scant for our purposes. When discussing restructuring, Tricia Bruce quotes a diocesan planner noting that "it's all ad hoc". Bruce argues that canon law provides "minimal instruction", even noting that "merging" of parishes, something used by dioceses regularly, is "a concept that does not exist in canon law".⁶⁵ We will see a little more of this in Chapter Four when we look at the approaches which dioceses have used. Bishops appear to adopt very different approaches, and not just because dioceses' needs diverge. It would seem therefore that there remain gaps in this arena.

Contemporary parish development literature, popular commentary

More pastorally useful and extensive is a genre of renewal literature which has appeared in recent years.⁶⁶ In a Catholic setting, *Divine Renovation* and *Rebuilt* are two of the oft cited texts, alongside the work of those such as Sherry Weddell.⁶⁷ Both *Divine Renovation* and *Rebuilt* are programmatic responses for combatting church decline, particularly at a parish level. *Divine Renovation* uses a mixture of a focus on the 'best of' leadership techniques, a focus on evangelisation (using *Alpha* from the Anglican tradition), and "empowerment

⁶³ Edward Pentin, "Vatican Conference Grapples With Issue of Decommissioning Churches," *National Catholic Reporter* 19 December 2018, <https://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/vatican-conference-grapples-with-issue-of-decommissioning-churches>; Nick Squires, "Strip clubs ruled out as Vatican warns against profane purposes for deconsecrated churches," *The Telegraph* 29 November 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/11/29/strip-clubs-vatican-discusses-do-growing-number-deconsecrated/> [accessed 30 March 2020].

⁶⁴ Tricia Colleen Bruce, *Parish and Place: Making Room for Diversity in the American Catholic Church*.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

⁶⁶ Though no analysis can be made to suggest that similar literature has not appeared in other periods.

⁶⁷ Michael White, Tom Corcoran, and Timothy Michael Dolan, *Rebuilt: the story of a Catholic parish: awakening the faithful, reaching the lost, making church matter* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 2013); James Mallon, *Divine renovation: bringing your parish from maintenance to mission* (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2014). Sherry A. Weddell, *Forming intentional disciples: the path to knowing and following Jesus* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2012). Such literature is slightly different to growth literature in an Anglican setting, which looks to analyse achieved growth, theologically and sociologically, across a number of parishes. Catholic works are typically written as practical 'how to' guides.

by the Holy Spirit". Fr James Mallon, the author, is a sage and practical guide on key topics and points towards interesting themes that we will want to take up later on: "If the Church is to be rebuilt, it must first be healed".⁶⁸ He draws on the "tradition of lamentation" and does not shy away from discussing the pain, suffering and theological confusion which can arise from an ongoing "lack of fruit" in the ministry of a local church.⁶⁹ Picking up themes we saw in the explicitly theological literature, he argues that "decline is not the gravest challenge we face as a Church. Indeed, a case can be made that, throughout history, the Church has been spiritually strongest when she has been institutionally impoverished and even socially marginalized."⁷⁰

Looking for similar literature elsewhere, one might point to popular commentary on the state of the Church, Rod Dreher's *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* for example. Further, in taking the temperature of the Church and understanding influences on its pastoral planning process, in a contemporary context one cannot ignore blogs, podcasts, video material and even tweets on the topic. Such commentary may not offer us immediate academic commentary for our topic, but certainly helps us understand the emotional tone surrounding diocesan planning processes (again, for more see Chapter Four) and points towards ideas to explore more systematically. Nevertheless, such works are not often explicitly concerned with how one might understand diminishment qua diminishment (more how to respond to such a situation) and do not focus on our key questions, especially that concerned with the paschal mystery.

Fresh Expressions literature

Outside of a Catholic sphere, a largely non-academic literature also surrounds a changing church in the Anglican tradition. A flavour might be given by the following, when discussing the future of the parish:

Underlying all this is the conviction that in the present climate we need to cherish and encourage a mixed economy: the flourishing of many different fresh expressions of church alongside and as part of more traditional parishes.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Mallon, *Divine renovation: bringing your parish from maintenance to mission*, 44.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 44, 55.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 46.

⁷¹ Croft, *The future of the parish system: shaping the Church of England for the twenty-first century*, 178.

Books entitled *Creating the Future of the Church: A practical guide to addressing whole-system change*, or *If entrepreneurs ran the Church* offer interesting lessons, for example bringing to the fore Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' work *On Death and Dying* or Kurt Lewin's model for change. These themes certainly have some relevance for our analysis.⁷² However, as well as predominantly falling outside of a Catholic sphere, such literature is, again, more responsive to the state of a particular church now, and does not reflect systematically, or theologically, on the question of how to understand a church which is diminishing. There are moreover important critiques of the theological underpinnings of such literature which would need exploring further, especially from a Catholic standpoint.⁷³ Such writing also rarely explores how diminishment may be a trajectory that the Church sometimes needs to accept, but starts from a viewpoint that the institution must find ways to return to growth. It will be interesting to see, when looking at diocesan materials, how a similar approach is often taken by pastoral planners (the extensive use of concepts from the world of management and leadership theory, for example) and where it leaves room for deeper engagement with questions of diminishment. We can only, again, note an absence and say that none of the works, whilst perhaps interesting to a diminishing Church have anything substantial to say about how to understand God's movement within diminishment itself, even despite the best efforts of people to arrest this trajectory.

Ars Moriendi

Also interesting for our topic, though again instructive but not systematic, is a small amount of literature which looks at the topic of dying well in religious life: "the charismatic art of dying".⁷⁴ Though written for religious institutes, it clearly has relevance. The authors draw on J.B Metz's work *Zeit der Orden?* and discuss ways in which religious orders might respond to their particular historical moment.⁷⁵ Key articles are prefaced by describing the concrete situation, for example: "Looking at the current state of religious life in Europe, we see that the numbers of religious have been declining for decades, while their average age continues to rise."⁷⁶ Such a framing is echoed by the diocesan

⁷² Cited in Keith Elford, *Creating the Future of the Church: a Practical Guide to Addressing Whole-system Change* (SPCK Publishing, 2013). Peter Kerridge, *If Entrepreneurs Ran the Church: New Visions for an Old Church* (SPCK, 2017).

⁷³ See Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, *For the parish: a critique of fresh expression* (London: SCM Press, 2010), vii. It argues that Fresh Expressions is "accepting the very choice-led individualism from which Christianity should seek to liberate us".

⁷⁴ Cees van Dam, Theo Sponselee, and Ad Leys, "Explorations on the "Completion" of Religious Institutes," *The Resource Center Religious Institutes Bulletin* Fall, no. 8 (2012).

⁷⁵ Johann Baptist Metz, *Zeit der Orden?* (Topos: Verlagsgem, 2014)

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

materials in this study. Dying well is an overriding theme, which points us to the heart of our key question about the paschal journey: “Rather than hide from them or hope—sometimes beyond hope—that things will change, the members are called to face the realities and to move into the future with confidence that the Spirit is still calling them, but this time the call is to completion.”⁷⁷ Such literature is fascinating for our purpose, and pastorally very instructive, however, it needs further development and systematic exploration. It provides a useful frame, however, in clearly acknowledging the possibility of organisational death within the Church, in a way perhaps that some of our diocesan documents will be less keen to confront. The themes here will be particularly explored in Chapter Three.

Diocesan planning documents and approaches within other denominations

Finally, as will be seen, we might even see that the documents which dioceses are producing in response to their current situation (those in England, Wales, Ireland, Scotland and the United States having been looked at in this study) are a particular genre of their own, inventing, as they sometimes do, new forms of pastoral organisation (e.g., the idea of parish ‘partnerships’).

In other ecclesial settings, one might see the Renewal and Reform literature from the Anglican church as similar, or that of the Panel on Review and Reform from the Church of Scotland. These are certainly espoused and operant theologies which have much to tell us about responses to a diminishing church. For example, a clearer sense of a coordinated effort than we find in the English and Welsh Catholic Church comes from the Renewal and Reform programme of the Church of England. It is rooted in clearly defined processes of national church governance, authority and decision making, commissioned by General Synod in 2010.⁷⁸ The programme is explicitly aimed at similar issues to those of our Catholic dioceses under discussion. It “looks specifically to address some of the deep-rooted missional challenges” faced by the church and although “it prayerfully hopes to see a growing church as fruit of all these labours, growth understood in its fullest sense ... it doesn't seek to duck the serious challenges we face but rather is based on a realistic assessment of where we are and how we might respond.” It explicitly

⁷⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁸ This is also not to say that Renewal and Reform is more authoritative or effective than the pastoral letters issued by Catholic Bishops, just that its approach is more tightly defined than the broad range of approaches we have seen Catholic dioceses adopt.

desires though to “reverse the decline of the Church of England so that we become a growing church”.⁷⁹ Using similar themes to those of the Catholic dioceses it roots itself in concepts of hope and in the call of Luke 10:2 that the Lord send more workers to the harvest. It is enough for now to note that this is a related body of literature which we can read alongside our own diocesan works. Nowhere, however, is there any sustained treatment given to the concept of the paschal mystery, nor sustained discussion of the nature of the Church in a period of diminishment, specifically seeking to understand how such a period may be different to another period of the Church’s life.

5. Extra-ecclesial sources

Management and sociological approaches

Another obvious, but not explicitly theological space from which to explore these questions is through literature which comes from the world of management, organisational development and sociology. We will see when examining diocesan materials how formative such resources have been.

For example, the sociologist Tricia Bruce, analysing the Church in organisational terms, frames her work as follows:

I turn to the logic of organizations to rethink religious collectives from the top: as institutional strategy, rather than primarily the product of autonomous believers’ behaviour. ... Organizational change is contingent upon institutions; outcomes are influenced by institutional authorities even as they are born of participants’ own agency.⁸⁰

Bridging to our themes of death and diminishment, another writer about the Church offers the following:

Sociologists have proved that all human organizations, movements and institutions have a lifecycle whose stages can effectively be predicted as it moves from origination to closure, from birth to death. Inasmuch as a local church or a

⁷⁹ "Renewal and Reform" <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/renewal-reform/> [accessed 15 February 2020].

⁸⁰ Bruce, *Parish and place: making room for diversity in the American Catholic church*, 8.

focused community behaves like a human institution, it too can be seen to undergo the same cyclic structure.⁸¹

Such a stream of writers, going back to the 1970s in publications such as *Concilium*, and perhaps further, are particularly trying to grapple with the Church as an institution and represent one common response to change, offering insights for us to take up in theological explorations.⁸²

David Coghlan, an Irish Jesuit, writes in particular detail in this vein in a way which helps illuminate the potential usefulness of our intended, more theological approach. Writing about change in the Irish Province of the Society of Jesus in the 1960s-80s:

[t]he content of the change typically dealt with issues of policy formulation and adaptation and accompanying strategies to meet a changed environment and was worked at through mechanisms which attempted to coordinate the Province's activities across its many ministries, to affect what individual ministries were doing and how they did it, and to implement a major re-education on what it is to be a Jesuit and a Jesuit ministering in Ireland in the latter part of the twentieth century.⁸³

The diocesan plans we are exploring could easily be described similarly. However, the movement of God in such a process is not at all examined explicitly, so whilst this approach may provide useful insights for the discipline of Organisational Development (the above comes from Coghlan's PhD thesis), it offers relatively little for our own purposes.

There is also a sense in which operating at this level of understanding (through management approaches) is not leading to the desired effects. Pointing to a weakness or incompleteness in this type of approach, two quotations from Coghlan lead to very inconclusive findings:

⁸¹ Angela Shier-Jones, *Pioneer ministry and fresh expressions of church* (London: SPCK, 2009), ix.

⁸² Gregory Baum and A. Greely, eds., *The Church as Institution* (New York: Herder, 1974).

⁸³ David Coghlan, *Planned change in the Irish province of the Society of Jesus, 1965-1986: a case study in organisation developments*. (PhD University College Dublin, Ireland, 1993), 6.

There is no doubt that change has taken place in the Irish Province of the Jesuits. An outstanding question asks whether this change is due to the planned efforts described in the preceding chapters or whether it is due to other forces, for instance the fall in numbers. Has change been planned or has it evolved because the world has changed?⁸⁴

He continues:

There is no either-or answer to this question, but rather a question of degrees of influence. As already outlined earlier in this chapter, there were many forces for change in the Irish Province's field of experience – some of which were external and some internal.⁸⁵

A letter from the Irish Provincial of 1980 would therefore not feel out of place today in a diocesan letter or in a religious order:

On the one hand, we have identified the areas of work for the next ten-year period. On the other hand, we have a limited number of men and skills. We wish to use the men in the most effective way and to prepare people for new work according to special needs that are arising... In ten years' time, nearly half the Province will be over 65 years of age and nearly three quarters of the Province will be over 50...we must plan for the next ten years on the basis of there being only half the number of people available in the 30-65 age group for all our works...⁸⁶

Dioceses face a very similar set of issues now. So, whilst Coghlan's analysis may be true, it tells us little theologically for our own topic. The question of how God is moving in this ongoing period of diminishment remains open.

In a practical context, the work of the Kinharvie Institute would be somewhere to turn if one wanted to explore this work in more depth. Nevertheless, again, whilst interesting and formative for dioceses, ultimately this type of literature does not strictly help us to

⁸⁴ David Coghlan, *Planned change*, 307.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 307.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 247.

answer the questions we are posing – it remains too much focused around questions of ‘how’ rather than ‘why’.⁸⁷ Stephen Pattinson’s work on the use of management language is a useful partner here, his diagnosis exploring how management concepts (e.g., vision, mission, purpose, effectiveness) have all too readily been adopted (in his case study the British National Health Service, but just as readily applicable to the Church) without a sense of their underlying theology and eschatology.⁸⁸ All this will return, in Chapter Four, when looking at the various influences on our diocesan materials.

Historical analysis

Drawing near the end of our sources, historical works provide a further rich seam, both of Christianity and Catholicism in a particular country or region and also across the world more generally. A theologian has plenty of contextual material upon which to reflect considering just the history of Catholicism in England and Wales since the Reformation. However, writing directly on our theme, the historian Philip Jenkins signals that there is much more of interest. Discussing the flourishing and ultimate diminishment of much eastern Christianity in the first and early second millennia, he is particularly keen to challenge a Eurocentric view of the faith and one which applies “a kind of Darwinian perspective, assuming that some versions of the religion succeeded because they were better adapted to their circumstances than were others.”⁸⁹ Using imagery that would be familiar for our topic, of planting, pruning, decline, death and even extinction, he goes on to write that “[t]heologians seldom address the troubling questions raised by the destruction of churches and of Christian communities” and furthermore, interested particularly in instances of almost complete eclipse, that “[d]eChristianization is one of the least studied aspects of Christian history.”⁹⁰ He laments the cultural loss to humanity from the destruction of any religion or denomination and helps us see how many of the forces facing faith in contemporary contexts are often not historically unique, but speak

⁸⁷ Analysis of Leeds Diocese by Kinharvie for example has lots of good content on how consultations processes might have been run better. It does not once, however, mention God or any person of the Trinity, nor frame its analysis at all theologically or biblically. Produced by Kinharvie Institute on behalf of Diocese of Leeds, A Review of ‘Providing Priests for the People’ September 2012.

⁸⁸ Stephen Pattison, "Mystical Management: a Religious Critique of General Management in the Public Sector" in *Theology and sociology: a reader*, ed. Robin Gill (London: Cassell, 1996), 495. He cautions: “If managers are to engage in the religious activity of helping shape fundamental world views, values and assumptions, they would do well to consider and discipline their metaphors lest their secondary meanings shape a reality which may even be counter-productive to their primary intentions.” He is particularly concerned that certain concepts are born of a charismatic, evangelical, American Christianity, without critical reflection.

⁸⁹ Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 28.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

to the vulnerability of faith in all ages. Coming around to some of our questions directly (and drawing on the Holocaust as well as the persecuted European mission to Japan) he begins to ask theological questions about whether God's "ordering" of the world includes "the annihilation of many of the world's churches, the persecution or defection of their believers".⁹¹ He is as much keen to show how Christianity was born, grew, revitalised and endured in certain circumstances, perhaps never quite becoming truly 'extinct'. He acknowledges too that what appears to proceed in a haphazard fashion may of course be anything but that.⁹² Nevertheless, that such trajectories require exploring, historically, but also theologically is his constant refrain. What we might believe about God's movement in the world, as well as the appropriate form of the Church, and how we might understand the transience of human affairs, are questions which emerge from such a study of collapse.⁹³ His work, married to others, points the way, but leaves open more to be done.

Ancillary, Poetic, Narrative sources

Concluding this review, there are also commentators who might teach us something instructive from literature which explores species extinction, ecosystem collapse and degradation,⁹⁴ others who look at the psychological response to change and diminishment, sometimes within the Church, particularly how processes of grief may be undergone by groups facing disappearance.⁹⁵ All have useful approaches to offer to the questions we pose here and some have no doubt shaped the responses by dioceses, if only in framing the world of metaphors which dioceses inhabit. Contributions from a broader literature are also instructive, though this is certainly ancillary to our purposes here. T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* makes a not infrequent appearance in commentators' writings who make this general area their topic.⁹⁶ G.K. Chesterton too in *The Everlasting Man*: "Christendom has had a series of revolutions and in each one of them Christianity has died. Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew

⁹¹ Ibid., 248.

⁹² Ibid., 252-257.

⁹³ Ibid., 260.

⁹⁴ In a time of climate and biodiversity collapse, the possible comparisons are endless, but a good start might be Joanna Macy, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy* (New World Library, 2012).

⁹⁵ For example, Michael Crosby, *The dysfunctional church: addiction and codependency in the family of Catholicism* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1991).

⁹⁶ For example, cited in Jean Hutton and Bruce Reed, *Churches Experiencing Change* (Paper at the Summer School for the Diocese of Durham, The Grubb Institute, 2002) and not irregularly elsewhere. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber, 2001).

the way out of the grave.”⁹⁷ Clearly none of the above is central to our analysis, but it is worth noting and offers a richer base from which to draw in theological and pastoral developments that may follow.

6. Conclusion

There are no doubt gaps in this survey and, with particular questions about diminishment and the paschal mystery in mind, areas of the literature which have not been explored in as much depth as could prove interesting. Such a wide-ranging foray across various sources is perhaps also somewhat unsatisfying in places. Yet it points to key apparent challenge for our questions (and also for those tasked with thinking pastorally about church reform and renewal): that there is very little which grapples directly with our topic, and nothing which does so in any great depth.

What is also clear, and as we will see in more depth in the next chapter, is that one of the most important questions which arises is perhaps not only how the Church should understand and respond to institutional diminishment or decline, but how it should respond to change more generally. Nevertheless, none of the key commentators turn their attention particularly directly or extensively towards the question of how we might understand change in a specifically diminishing Church and certainly none give sustained commentary to the importance of the paschal mystery in this context. So too, no commentators are precise about the nature of resurrectional new life, as opposed to other forms of life and growth which we might see in the Church. Finally, there has been no sustained effort to reflect on the diocesan planning processes we are exploring here, a last thing to which we will want to attend.

Two commentators point the way for our ongoing analysis. Philip Jenkins writes: “Besides the missionary theology cultivated by many churches, we also need a theology of extinction.”⁹⁸ Similarly, C.J.H.M. Van Dam writes when exploring *Ars Moriendi* for religious orders: “it soon transpired that there is no specific academic knowledge about ‘shrinking organisations’.”⁹⁹

⁹⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (London: Burns & Oates, 1974), 160.

⁹⁸ Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 249.

⁹⁹ van Dam, Sponselee, and Leys, "Explorations on the "Completion" of Religious Institutes," 14.

I have not come across anything that directly contradicts such claims, and certainly not within an ecclesial or theological setting. The task of developing an extinction/diminishment/collapse theology/ecclesiology therefore remains open.

To proceed, starting with the broadest question, we will analyse work by Karl Rahner, looking at his concepts of change in the Church. This will be followed by a chapter looking at Rahner's theology of death and Hans Urs von Balthasar on the paschal mystery. Of those explored, both authors seemed to offer the greatest potential for further depth and insight. Having drawn from these writers a substantive ecclesiological approach to diminishment using the lens of the paschal mystery, in the final substantive chapter we will begin to look at contemporary diocesan restructuring plans.

Chapter 2: Karl Rahner's principles for ecclesiological reform, renewal and change

*While Christ, holy, innocent and undefiled knew nothing of sin, but came to expiate only the sins of the people, the Church, embracing in its bosom sinners, at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, always follows the way of penance and **renewal**. (Lumen Gentium 8)*

*Every **renewal** of the Church is essentially grounded in an increase of fidelity to her own calling. Undoubtedly this is the basis of the movement toward unity. Christ summons the Church to continual **reformation** as she sojourns here on earth. The Church is always in need of this, in so far as she is an institution of men here on earth. (Unitatis Redintegratio 6)*

*The Church also maintains that **beneath all changes** there are many **realities which do not change** and which have their ultimate foundation in Christ, Who is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever. (Gaudium et Spes 10)*

[My emphasis]

1. Introduction

This chapter starts to outline a constructive theology of ecclesial change. To begin, Avery Dulles offers us some reflections about the importance of attending to this task carefully and presents a firm challenge to our analysis and that of our interlocutors: "The idea of reform is as old as Christianity itself. Reform is by definition a good thing, and frequently is needed both on the personal and on the institutional level. But history teaches that reform can be misconceived and indiscreet."¹⁰⁰

We will examine some of these claims in more depth below. However, as well as heeding the advice to proceed cautiously, what Dulles remind us, and should also not be forgotten in our contemporary context, is that the Church appears to be undergoing changes of

¹⁰⁰ Dulles, Avery Cardinal "True and False Reform," *First Things*, August 2003, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2003/08/true-and-false-reform> [accessed 27 March 2020].

various types all the time, some it is in control of, others it is not.¹⁰¹ Therefore, although in this study we are considering a particular moment of one church's life (that of Catholic institutional diminishment in contemporary England and Wales), the most useful starting point for our theoretical discussions, as we mentioned in conclusion to Chapter One, will be not to consider change in the context of institutional decline, but change in the Church more generally.¹⁰² Does the Church change? When does it change? How does it change? Laying the theoretical foundations for our later analysis, these and associated questions are central for discussing how and why the Church might change in a period of diminishment.¹⁰³

2. Rahnerian ecclesiology

Karl Rahner and his contemporaries, whose works spanned the momentous transitions of the Second Vatican Council, give us an angle from which to explore the topic.¹⁰⁴ Rahner's writings will be central in the discussion, whilst Yves Congar and Avery Dulles will make occasional appearances in the footnotes.¹⁰⁵ Our commentators are not

¹⁰¹ See later for full analysis as Rahner is aware this point remains debatable. Nevertheless, for now, although the nature of changes to the Church will come under discussion, it can hardly be disputed that some form of change is always occurring in the Church, even if only that individuals join and leave the Church's membership with their passing through life and the passing of time. In material terms, changes are extremely apparent: changes of various forms are both externally imposed on the church (e.g., a church building collapses because of the effects of the weather over time and poor maintenance) as well as internally willed and driven (e.g., the Pope decides to use Twitter or change what shoes he wears). Changes within the historical, mystical body of the Church will be considered further below, but even Christ, as Jesus, underwent material changes as he grew in age and knowledge and was persecuted. To claim an entirely immutable Church may be possible, but would stretch far beyond the way in which we are using such concepts here.

¹⁰² As will be seen in these explorations, there will also be other, wider questions lurking in the background here. How change happens in the Church is deeply related to questions about how change happens in creation more generally, questions about the nature of progress, our eschatological trajectory. We will set such questions aside largely for now whilst we explore Rahner's works, though such first order and root questions issues will linger on the horizon and could be incorporated into a wider study.

¹⁰³ A crucial distinction will be made throughout between the types of changes upon which we focus our attention. We are, as will be clear from the diocesan documents, interested in what we are terming 'material change'. Rahner has a concept of 'structural change' which incorporates this. Changes at the levels of belief and dogma clearly drive material changes (and the process will also work the other way around) and will therefore be relevant here, but our primary focus will be on changes as incarnated in lived practice (e.g., a particular form of parish structure is chosen, the Mass is reordered in a particular manner etc.). When theory or belief takes root in visible practice will be our concern.

¹⁰⁴ For Rahner's reflections about the size of changes in society and the church in his lifetime see Karl Rahner, *I remember: an autobiographical interview with Meinold Krauss*, ed. Meinold Krauss (London: SCM, 1984), 27-28, 38-38, 56.

¹⁰⁵ Given his range of reflections, Rahner seems an apt commentator for us to start with. However, as noted, he is certainly not alone amongst his contemporaries in having such an extensive interest in change. Yves Congar wrote nearly 650 pages on the topic of *True and False Reform in the Church*, in a book which was forbidden from further publication upon its release in 1950, showing just how contentious the idea of reform could be. Paul Philbert tells this tale in his translator's introduction to the book: "It is clear that Archbishop Angelo Roncalli (later to become Pope John XXIII) discovered and read *True and False Reform* during his years as papal nuncio in France. He asked in response to reading it, "A reform of

managers, though some are bishops, and they are chiefly theologians. Firstly therefore, a key question worth asking is how these theologians intended for their ideas and writings to find expression in the life of the Church, and what, in the most outline form, their 'method for ecclesiological change' might be.¹⁰⁶

Rahner is claimed to be a somewhat unfashionable figure in contemporary theology, but an exploration of his works will be seen to reward with rich insights.¹⁰⁷ Notably, as well as offering a theoretical framework for exploring change in the Church, Rahner in many ways remains a prophetic and enjoyable commentator to follow, especially through some of his works for a wider audience, such as in his book *The Shape of the Church to Come*.

However, as alluded to before, and what will become clear later, is that though Rahner paints us a picture of the landscape of the Church today¹⁰⁸ and a proposed one of tomorrow, he tells us very little about the journey between these two worlds of the Church.¹⁰⁹ Drawing from across his various writings, we will pull together what might appear to be his ecclesiological principles for change; however, any method is certainly only to be found in outline. The reasons for and the implications of this lacuna will be our main interest towards the end of this analysis.

the church: is such a thing really possible?"" Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2011). Whether true, or apocryphal, it illustrates a perceived view about the Church's views about reform and change before the Council. Rahner was well aware of the volume, See: Karl Rahner, "Basic Observations on the Subject of Changeable and Unchangeable Factors in the Church," in *Theological Investigations; 14*, ed. David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976), 3.

¹⁰⁶ The word 'method' could easily imply that we are searching here for a structured and step-by-step approach or procedure that could be developed for a process of change, which church members and authorities could follow from beginning to end. That is not my desire, though there is a risk it could be seen as so. Method is intended to encompass the loosest possible framing of a process in which one has some involvement. Other words that could be used are practice, way, technique, art, orientation. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." (John 3:16) would, for example, fall within this conception of 'method.' Karen Kilby's reflections assist here in cautioning against theological hubris and overly rigid conceptions of 'method': "Now, I think that some narratives of decline are interesting, and that the work of retrieval is valuable. But to suppose that if only we get our theology right, all shall be well and historic ecclesial declines will be reversed, seems to put ourselves, as theologians, a little too decisively at the centre of the story." Karen Kilby, *Mystery and the Contours of the Church: Revisiting Rahner* (Conference Paper 'Catholic Theology in the Public Academy', Unpublished, Durham, 2018)

¹⁰⁷ Kilby comments on Rahner's reception in modern theology, *ibid.* Also Padraic Conway and Fainche Ryan, *Karl Rahner: Theologian for the Twenty-First Century* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), xi.

¹⁰⁸ In fact, the 1970s, but representative enough of the contemporary situation.

¹⁰⁹ This will be covered in more depth later.

Setting the scene within Rahner's thought

Before outlining Rahner's views about change, a point to note initially is that Rahner on the concept of change (in the Church, but also more generally, and separate to his ideas about the development of dogma) is not regularly, systematically nor extensively addressed by commentators (at least in English). In fact, only Richard Lennan offers us detailed analysis of some of the texts we are using, and then again not quite along the same lines as we will explore here. Yet the topic warrants a separate section entitled "Church: Change and Future" in C. Pedley's extensive 1984 thematic bibliography, and were Rahner's writings explicitly referencing the topic collected together, they would comfortably fill half a volume of *Theological Investigations*.¹¹⁰ His reflections on the concept of change are certainly not mere marginalia.¹¹¹ That Rahner wrote an essay "Basic Observations on the Subject of Changeable and Unchangeable Factors in the Church", which incorporates key principles about how he imagines change to happen, is therefore not surprising and will be central to our analysis. Recognising this apparent gap in the secondary literature, and given that the ideas being engaged are scattered across a range of writings, the discussion will proceed with fairly extensive narrative.¹¹² Yet, though a model for change will be outlined, and perhaps appear quite systematic, nowhere is such a structured approach to these ideas found in Rahner's own writings.

Such a gap in secondary literature does seem puzzling, however, as understanding Rahner's theoretical ideas of change seems crucial in wrestling with his wider ecclesiology.¹¹³ Beyond those writings that address the topic theoretically and explicitly, casting the net of our reflections more widely, across *Theological Investigations* and his books, we can see him writing about processes of change in the context of: reform, the impacts of Vatican II, the Church of the future, an appropriate theology of the future,

¹¹⁰ These works from Pedley's bibliography, in addition to others, will be the main ones discussed here: "Basic Observations on the Subject of Changeable and Unchangeable Factors in the Church", *TI* 14; "Dream of the Church", *TI* 20; "The Future of the Church and the Church of the Future", *TI* 20; "The Question of the Future", *TI* 12; "Perspectives for the Future of the Church", *TI* 12. "Structural Change in the Church of the Future", *TI* 20; "Transformations in the Church and Secular Society", *TI* 17. Pedley's biography can be found in *Heythrop Journal*, XXV, 1984, 319-65.

¹¹¹ O'Donovan has commented how the way in which *Theological Investigations* is published can perhaps prohibit easily seeing themes across the work. See Leo O'Donovan, "A Journey into Time: The Legacy of Karl Rahner's Last Years," *Theological Studies* 46, no. 4 (1985).

¹¹² It is sometimes somewhat frustrating that so many of Rahner's essays in *TI* start with a disclaimer that he will not be able to deal with the topic under consideration in depth. But that is the nature of his method and related to the purposes for which individual essays and talks were written.

¹¹³ Material which, it is claimed, covers over half his output. See: Declan Marmion, "Some Aspects of the Theological Legacy of Karl Rahner", in Conway and Ryan. Conway and Ryan, *Karl Rahner: Theologian for the Twenty-First Century*, 8.

transformations in society, social revolutions, change within the Society of Jesus, changes in religious poverty, personal conversions, evolution, the development of dogma. Furthermore, the specific topics to which Rahner turned his attention in the context of change are known to be extensive (e.g., bishops, the role of laity, priesthood, Religious Life, the diaconate, other religions, Vatican II, the Eucharist, the Mass and television, sacraments, ethics). Almost everything concrete and historical for Rahner is in a state of changing, or at least being assessed as to whether it should change. The range of topics covered does suggest that any follower of his might well be interested in both the process as well as the goal.

A key question to ask therefore is “how did Rahner imagine change to come about?” The answer is not easily gleaned. Despite finding much rich material, towards the end of our discussion we will conclude that we find Rahner spending relatively little time on the question of how change occurs, and will wonder if this contributes to critiques made against him, as well as relates to the push back by certain groups in the Church against the way in which Vatican II renewal was implemented. We will see him in his later years grappling more frequently with questions about how theory is related to practice, but, through his own acknowledgement, leaving much work to be done.

3. Rahner’s method and his theological ambitions

Firstly, we will do well to briefly mention, in his own words, what he was seeking to achieve. Despite being a significant voice calling for changes in the Church, Rahner did not see everything he desired realised, nor have we since.¹¹⁴ Does, putting things starkly, Rahner bear any responsibility for this, not just in the possible inadequacy or errancy of some of his suggestions, but the way in which he approached the theological task?

Whether critiquing Rahner for his theological method is justified should at least to some extent be measured against the ambitions of his own project, his natural limitations and what he saw as his vocation. No theologian can do everything,¹¹⁵ nor can they perfectly

¹¹⁴ See comments in Conway and Ryan, *Karl Rahner: Theologian for the Twenty-First Century*, xiii. So many of the changes Rahner called for in the Church have not been taken up, e.g., suspending the law of celibacy in contexts where there are too few priests. For a summary of his key ideas see Karl Rahner et al., *Faith in a Wintry Season: Conversations and Interviews with Karl Rahner in the Last Years of his Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 5; Karl Rahner, "Perspectives for the Future of the Church," in *Theological Investigations; 12*, ed. David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974).

¹¹⁵ For Rahner’s view on this see *I Remember*, 60.

read the signs of the times, the work of that ultimately being the Spirit's.¹¹⁶ Rahner is acutely aware in *The Shape of the Church to Come* that an individual could not be expert in all the disciplines necessary to support change in the Church, this in line with his wider theological reflections about the changing nature of theology, human knowledge and pluralism.¹¹⁷ Despite his prodigious output, he counted himself amongst those whose work could certainly not cover everything. Nor too, would this be desirable. He writes at one point to Carmelite nuns: “[i]f someone thinks that the Christian life must be completely realized in each individual (as if everyone had to be contemplative and active, and so on), the result will only be mediocrity and ordinariness.”¹¹⁸

He was also aware that the project of the Church is never finished, an idea to which we shall return later in our discussions. Therefore, to suggest that his writings were, in any sense, meant to be definitive, would completely miss the nature of his task; though Karen Kilby has argued for a “systematic core” in his work, he clearly did not aim to be comprehensive.¹¹⁹ He did not think that possible in the first instance and, in any case, his approach was more of the dilettante.¹²⁰ Kilby, quoting some of his reflections towards the end of his life, shows his relative modesty:

What I have to say, therefore, is only: Accept the moment. See to it that you do what one can call, without any folderol, your duty. All the same, be ready again and again to realize once more, that the ineffable mystery we call God not only lives and reigns, but had the unlikely idea to approach you personally in love.¹²¹

Rahner, in his own words, was aware of the limits of his approach and what he could seek to achieve, discerned as best he could.¹²² More explicitly perhaps, in reflections

¹¹⁶ “Signs of the times” arises as an important concept in post-Vatican II theology, following its inclusion in *Gaudium et Spes* 4. It follows through as a particularly important concept in Pedro Arrupe SJ’s reforms of the Jesuits during the 1970s. See Rahner’s use of it in *Theological Investigations*, 17.

¹¹⁷ See Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner* (London: Fount, 1997), 53-55.

¹¹⁸ Karl Rahner, *Opportunities for faith: elements of a modern spirituality* (London: S.P.C.K., 1974), 74. He also has some interesting reflections on the idea that the Church should organise theologians in teams, as is customary in science: Karl Rahner, D. C. Herron, and R. Albrecht, *The Church after the Council* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1966), 106.

¹¹⁹ Kilby, *Karl Rahner*, 51-52.

¹²⁰ Rahner et al., *Faith in a Wintry Season: Conversations and Interviews with Karl Rahner in the Last Years of his Life*, 19; Karl Rahner, “The Question of the Future,” in *Theological Investigations*; 12, ed. David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974), 188.

¹²¹ Kilby, *Karl Rahner*, 74 quoting *I Remember*, 275.

¹²² *I Remember*, 2, 16.

evaluating his achievements towards the end of his life, he says that it was not a concern of his to “plan”, that he left it for others to “judge” his work, and that he “neither could, nor wanted, to foresee the long-term effects of anything [he had] said”.¹²³ On a daily basis, with almost no serious hobbies he claimed,¹²⁴ he wrote and taught, and did not, it seems, much concern himself with measuring what we would now in the academic world label ‘impact’.

Nevertheless, Rahner clearly aims to contribute to change and make a difference in the life of the Church, being, as he says, ultimately pastoral in his project,¹²⁵ addressing key contemporary issues and often cutting a path between traditionally divisive debates to find a way forward. In *The Christian of the Future* he writes:

The first essay, ‘The Changing Church’, offers some thoughts on the limits of change within the self-understanding of the Catholic Church. It seeks not merely to warn against a falsely understood ‘progressism’, but, with the same decisiveness, to arouse courage to discover new and bold ways in the Church of God.¹²⁶

He is not merely passive then. As he challenges us elsewhere, we must always be “ready again and again” to be open to “the ineffable mystery” and to “turn our eyes to Jesus, the crucified one”, developing our vocation along the way.¹²⁷

Still, with these caveats and appropriate respect for what Rahner saw as his own duty, it might still be asked whether for the discerning theologian of today there are ways in

¹²³ *Wintery Season*, 13-15.

¹²⁴ *I Remember*, 61.

¹²⁵ *I Remember*, 21: “I really wasn’t interested in scholarship for the sake of scholarship. My needs and outlook were completely, immediately, and genuinely pastoral – at least, so I believe.” His resignation from the International Theological Commission in 1974 because (Conway argues) “the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was not taking its recommendations seriously” and also his ongoing desire for writing that is “credible” suggests also a man concerned with making a difference. See Eamonn Conway, ‘Rahner’s Tough Love’ for the Church: Structural Change as Task and Opportunity” in Padraic Conway and Fainche Ryan, *Karl Rahner: Theologian for the Twenty-First Century* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 146,50. See also, 147-148 on Rahner’s intense engagement with issues of Church reform and renewal in the early 1970s.

¹²⁶ Karl Rahner, *The Christian of the future; translated by W. J. O’Hara* (Freiburg: Herder; London: Burns & Oates, 1967). Available at: <https://www.religion-online.org/book/the-christian-of-the-future/>.

¹²⁷ Kilby, *Karl Rahner*, 74 quoting *I Remember*, 275.

which his theological method and approach can be improved. Early indications suggest there are some avenues for exploration.

Notably, Rahner's general methodological approach will be seen to be consistent with his approach to how change comes about in the Church; a shortfall in his overall methodology can be seen to feed into an inadequacy in the way in which he characterises change in the Church. We will assess the merits of his approach later and shall return to his claim in later life that, having written a theological piece, "it is entirely impossible to say to what extent that article penetrates public consciousness, changes things or moves people."¹²⁸ For now, focusing on his autobiographical comments, we can wonder at his claim here that it is *entirely* impossible? He can often appear strangely passive, about the impact he and others might have in the world. Through one lens, his approach could be seen to be committed and earnest, but through another also at times nearly *laissez-faire*. Asked about his response to Nazism during the war he says: "when all is said and done, one really doesn't know, even in hindsight, what one should have done at the time."¹²⁹ Immediately after this comment, challenging the youth of today he says: "[a]nd if you too must go through the times we did, then let's see if you will be that much more prescient, courageous, and willing to risk your lives than we were in our time."¹³⁰ Again, one person cannot do everything, but such writing is not Rahner at his most appealing, the events of the Second World War in his lifetime perhaps most of all calling for an honest self-examination of conscience, repentance and call for self-improvement. He is honest, encouragingly, and receives high praise from those who knew him, but one gets the distinct impression from his autobiographical comments of a man who has not had to struggle much in life, as he himself freely admits, and at times does not fully reflect on the impact he could or could not have had on the world.¹³¹ How this feeds into his methodological approach will be interesting for us to ponder as the discussion proceeds.¹³² Again, humbly recognising one man's journey with God, there is not a

¹²⁸ *Wintry Season*, 14.

¹²⁹ *I Remember*, 51.

¹³⁰ *I Remember*, 51.

¹³¹ See, for example, *I Remember*, 24-34 and 100.

¹³² Linda Hogan writes about the weaknesses of Rahner's approach in a world of complicated power relations: "what distinguished these political theologians, especially Metz, from the Rahnerian mode was a far greater appreciation of the concreteness of history, the particularity of individuals and the limitations of specific cultures and societies. Thus for the political theologians the transcendental dimension is more fully anchored and expressed in the concrete circumstances of history. Moreover, Metz was acutely attentive to the deformations of history evident in the abuse and oppression of

substantial critique to be made here, just an acknowledgement that Rahner's approach cannot be slavishly followed when approaching questions of change today.

4. Theoretical backdrop

As further background discussion to frame our analysis, though we are interested here in the component parts of a method for change which Rahner explores briefly, as outlined in, mainly, articles from *Theological Investigations*, such a method is intimately tied to Rahner's wider methodological, philosophical and theological outlook. As he himself alludes to in one essay, and can be seen from piecing together his fragments of thought, questions arise such as the way in which he conceived of history, time, the movement of the Spirit, Mariology, freedom, essence, and memory.¹³³ Part of Rahner's project is involved with sweeping aside an ossified neoscholastic world which was seen to be immutable; how he conceives of change can therefore not be divorced from his analysis of the philosophical and theological ideas that had led that world astray. It will therefore be useful to turn to some of the key concepts before proceeding. Leo O'Donovan, in particular, can be our brief guide in showing some of the connections between Rahner's views about change in the Church and his general theological outlook, especially in his later years.

Firstly, though change will be seen to be essential for Rahner, it is important to note that for him the Church does not proceed in a linear fashion towards progress, but must proceed most of all through a constant and "faithful following".¹³⁴ O'Donovan's claim for Rahner is that in "maturity we may hope to regard ourselves not as become more perfect but rather as having been guided by the providence of God through the adventure of a whole life we could never have calculated in advance."¹³⁵ How this resonates with Rahner's views about a method of change will become clear soon enough.¹³⁶

Though progress is not linear, the journey of history remains indispensable for Rahner, as "the human spirit [exists] only in a historical world". It is in humankind's and the

individuals and groups." In Conway, *The courage to risk everything: essays marking the centenary of Karl Rahner's birth*, 166.

¹³³ See *Changeable*, 8.

¹³⁴ O'Donovan, "A Journey into Time: The Legacy of Karl Rahner's Last Years," 632.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Also *ibid.*, 639: "For all his enduring concern to relate Christianity and evolutionary thought, he clearly rejected every scheme of inevitable or even steady progress."

Church's path through history that the Spirit speaks and our search for God can take place. God is ever acting through history, rather than only at particular moments or detached from the way in which history unfolds.¹³⁷ O'Donovan summarises how this relates to ongoing changes within the Church:

grace in its root meaning is the outpouring of Holy Spirit for the inner renewal and outward reorientation of every person, society, and time. As created gift, human life experiences a transcendental openness to the "ever-greater God" which can only be fully realized through historical activity.¹³⁸

We are, for Rahner, ever searching for the essence of things, but which cannot be found other than in a journey that unfolds through history.¹³⁹ We cannot find the Church, or ourselves in the abstract, but only as a unity between heaven and earth, typified in Mary and most fully manifest in the concrete event of the Word becoming flesh in history.¹⁴⁰

Therefore, though we are not engaged in a linear story, there is a clear trajectory and arc to history,¹⁴¹ most especially in realising that which is promised to us in Jesus Christ.¹⁴² However, our essential freedom in this process must never be removed or forgotten.¹⁴³ We must moreover accept our part in this future and have both a right and responsibility towards our efforts in the world, in the way Mary plays an essential part, in the annunciation, in freely responding to salvation history.¹⁴⁴ We will fall short in this effort, but the call on us is clear.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 626: "He did, however, explicitly reject the dilemma of a God who acts either by singular interventions in time or by transcending it altogether. His essentially symbolic view of transcendental causality continued to employ the distinction between the efficient causality of creation and the quasi-formal causality of redemption."

¹³⁸ Ibid., 629.

¹³⁹ *Question*, 187.

¹⁴⁰ Karl Rahner, *Mission and Grace Volume 3* (Sheed and Ward, 1966), 173-77.

¹⁴¹ "Here again the Spirit leads, but never past the cross...As we seek to identify more clearly this dynamic of salvation, we seek in fact an intelligible life in which it may be truly represented, a Word given us to be believed in forever (if we have found Christ) or to be sought for just as long (if he waits for us still). At the suggestion of the Spirit, we turn towards God by accompanying human life as the body of Christ." O'Donovan, "A Journey into Time: The Legacy of Karl Rahner's Last Years," 632.

¹⁴² *Question*, 182.

¹⁴³ See in particular *Question*, 200-201.

¹⁴⁴ See Rahner, *Mission and Grace* on Mariology or *Question*, 182.

Finally, in exploring how this unfolds, O'Donovan relates Rahner's thinking to that of historical materialism and dialectics but makes clear his different approach.¹⁴⁵ In this, for Rahner,

nature and humanity are conceived as dialectically united in a single world-historical process; the Incarnation is firmly related to hope for universal redemption; and the paschal mystery of Christ becomes the central dynamic in enacting the full material meaning of time. These were, if you will, Rahner's final efforts at temporalizing the imagination, proposing a *conversio ad phantasma per tempus*.¹⁴⁶

We will leave this discussion of wider theoretical discussions here, but as the discussion unfolds it will be seen in Section Six, below, how Rahner's view of change has this intimate sense of relating to past, present and future. Most notably, he has a deep sense of the onward march of time as being fundamental to the realisation of the mission of the Church. Perhaps he does not ground this concretely enough, but this is not an insignificant viewpoint. It contrasts with, perhaps, Dulles' concepts of reform being to bring about an "ideal already accepted." Dulles and Rahner have some commonality of perspective when Dulles says that "reform may be either restorative or progressive. Restorative reform seeks to reactualize a better past or a past that is idealized. Progressive reform aims to move ahead toward an ideal or utopian future." Both would have a sense of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*, but one gets the distinct impression for Rahner that there is no sense in which the process of change and reform is about returning to a pre-realised reality, because only in history can this realisation eventually take place.

A different moment in history

This is all particularly abstract. More concretely it is important also to acknowledge that much of Rahner's writing is conditioned by his sense as to the changed moment of history in which the Church is now living. He is well aware of the risky nature of his

¹⁴⁵ "Most basically of all, however, dialectic is his way to conceive identity in history" and "Rahner gives no extended discussion of what he means exactly by dialectic. But his usage in context clearly relates him to both Hegel and Marx in seeing dialectic as a historical process...At the same time, his usage distinguishes him sharply from their view of that process as a necessary movement." O'Donovan, "A Journey into Time: The Legacy of Karl Rahner's Last Years."

¹⁴⁶ O'Donovan, "A Journey into Time: The Legacy of Karl Rahner's Last Years," 637. *Translation: Returning to the image through time*

claims: "It is true that every age has thought that it was a new age such as had never been before"¹⁴⁷ yet is happy to assert "it is nevertheless true that we are, historically, in the midst of a *breaking-up of things* which does, in many important respects involve lumping together all past periods as one by contrast with that which is approaching."¹⁴⁸ His apparent interest here is three-fold: the speed at which change now happens; the way in which man now controls his own destiny and the world;¹⁴⁹ and, as to the tools that are dominant in this present age, particularly those technological and scientific. We will see more of this when discussing his views on planning in Section Six. Though our interest is not to examine the claims he makes in depth here, it is clear for Rahner that these developments of the modern era significantly affect the method through which change should be approached in the Church. Most notably the Church needs to take control of its destiny in a way it would not have had to previously. The approach we will see Rahner outlining is further shaped by reflection within this theoretical context.

5. Rahner's views about change in the church – extent and nature

Change in the church?

With this backdrop and accepting the limits of his project what therefore can we find of Rahner's beliefs about change within the Church? Firstly, in one essay, Rahner leads his analysis with a note that one's concept of change will be inseparable from the form of the Church that is being analysed: "If we are to speak of the Church's future, the obvious question arises as to which Church is meant. Is it the Catholic Church in our own country? The western Church? Or the world-Church as a whole?"¹⁵⁰ When looking at change he usually concentrates his reflections on the world-Church, and he asserts the requirement for an "understanding of its *nature* that is based on faith and theologically correct."¹⁵¹ That we need to consider the Church at all is not up for debate, however, the Church itself being "the object of Christian faith".¹⁵² Notably, the future for Rahner could not incorporate the idea of being spiritual but not religious, even if the form of religion that exists in the future may be radically different from what has gone before.

¹⁴⁷ Karl Rahner, *Mission and Grace Volume 3* (Sheed and Ward, 1966), 199.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Question*, 191.

¹⁵⁰ Karl Rahner, "The Future of the Church and the Church of the Future," in *Theological Investigations; 20* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981), 103.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 106-107.

However, taking this a little further, when looking at the world-Church his reflections are given for a concept of the Church that is Catholic, but also nods towards the rest of Christianity. He gives ample consideration to the nature of change within specific Catholic institutions, but does at times seem to have a wider concept of Church in mind.¹⁵³ Such a broad ecclesiological viewpoint thereby shapes his emotional response. Change is something to which Rahner will give a good deal of thought, but “hoping against hope”, he sees that “the Christian believes by an ultimate decision of faith, rooted in the depths of his existence, that the Church will exist also in the future”.¹⁵⁴ Rahner writes with an unwavering hope which substantially colours his approach and method.¹⁵⁵

The second question that arises, as Rahner is aware, is whether change actually occurs in the Church at all. From a sociological and historical point of view certain changes seem easy to see. However, that the Church changes is a source of at least some debate, rooted, as we can see in the Vatican II quote from the preface to this chapter, in concepts of the Church as the mystical body of Christ, and therefore which have an ‘ultimate reality’ which is unchanging. The genesis of this wariness is at least to some extent conditioned by the historical experience of the Church, and we will not explore it in depth, but Rahner is clearly aware of its lingering purchase and so addresses this directly.¹⁵⁶

Confronting the most obvious challenges, he wants to be clear about what types of changes he is considering:

We are not concerned with the manifold changes in the Church which form the main theme of Church history, in other words changes which are simply imposed on the Church as an inevitable consequence of the Church’s insertion in a total pattern of historically operative forces (State, civilization etc.). We are concerned with the change which the Church itself actively undertakes in its law and

¹⁵³ Compare these passages from *Future Church*, 103-104: “If then we refer explicitly here to the Catholic Church and its future, in the last resort we are looking in an ecumenical spirit to Christendom in its unity and wholeness and to its future” to when he is introducing anonymous Christians: “In its ultimate nature the Church is the sociologically and historically tangible and structured community of those who believe in Jesus Christ crucified and risen as the definitive and victoriously prevailing self-promise of the one and living God to the world. Hence this Church is the basic sacrament of the salvation of the world: of the world, and not only of those who belong to the Church itself expressly and in a sociologically tangible way.”

¹⁵⁴ *Future Church*, 107.

¹⁵⁵ Kilby, *Belief, Unbelief and Mystery*.

¹⁵⁶ On historical changes, see also *I Remember*, 68.

doctrine, and in which the Church changes itself, and is not merely subjected to change, though of course both sets of changes mutually affect one another.¹⁵⁷

Rahner is well aware that a narrative could be written which sees the Church as an unchanging body whose purpose is to stand firm as the world changes around it. His discussion, however, will take him into changes that the Church both brings upon itself and which it also saw, over time, as truthful changes to have brought about, which were in other language 'received'. We therefore see here another distinction he is drawing. Not only that some changes are chosen by the Church and others are not, but also that some are within the Church's power to affect and others are not, regardless of whether it wanted to have an influence. The importance of this distinction will become clearer later in Section Six when considering change that happens in the world through its very nature (fallen but also graced), and change that happens through particular moments of decision making and choice.

Yet for the avoidance of doubt, given that in this chapter we are laying foundations about the nature of change in the Church, the historical narrative he traces is worth following in some depth. He argues that "During the 'Pian epoch' of the Church (if we may so describe the period of the restoration in society and the Church after the French Revolution of 1789 up to the Second Vatican Council), in the Church's self-understanding the stress was laid on its 'unchangeability.'"¹⁵⁸ This had theological justification: "The Church insisted on its constitution *jure divino* as unchangeable, given to it from the outset by God himself in Jesus Christ",¹⁵⁹ which had particular consequences for the exercise and function of papal and episcopal authority. He only talks here of a stress on unchangeability, not an insistence, and recognises that "during this Pian epoch there were of course some not inconsiderable changes in the structures (in the sense explained above) of the Church."¹⁶⁰ His examples here include changes in the structures of the liturgy, internal governance following treaties with other states, to marriage laws, internationalization of the college of cardinals.¹⁶¹ Yet there is something

¹⁵⁷ Karl Rahner, *The Christian of the future*; translated by W. J. O'Hara (Freiburg: Herder; London: Burns & Oates, 1967). Available at: <https://www.religion-online.org/book/the-christian-of-the-future/>.

¹⁵⁸ Karl Rahner, "Structural Change in the Church of the Future," in *Theological Investigations*; 20 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981), 116.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁶⁰ *Structural*, 117. Rahner terms the era 'Pian' after Popes Pius IX to XII, see *I Remember*, 87.

¹⁶¹ *Structural*, 117.

of a wry smile that seems to appear in his commentary about the period before Vatican II and he is clear about the sense that prevailed in the church, with which certain viewpoints are still wrestling:

And even for those who were aware of the great and lively history of the dogma and constitution of the Church in this self-understanding from the primitive Church to the Pisan epoch, the impression prevailed that the Church had reached in its development a point from which there could be no return and beyond which not much really new or surprising was likely to happen. All this was worked out in terms of neoscholastic theology.¹⁶²

Writing from the early 1970s, it is clear how hard this earlier viewpoint is to maintain.¹⁶³ Since Vatican II, though there was still nervousness about the language that might be used, there had clearly been changes, and the processes of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* were well under way.¹⁶⁴

Rahner makes no judgement here about the merits of change, but is clearly keen to combat any lingering sense that the church is unchanging. Furthermore, neither 'siding' with the progressives or traditionalists, he can well understand why people, seeing the Catholic Church as a bastion against the forces of modernism, would be wary of change.¹⁶⁵ Nevertheless, he goes on to develop an argument that shows that such change is not only inevitable but also essential. His final move will be to suggest ways in which this change can happen that is faithful to the tradition in its fullest form.

Changeable and Unchangeable Factors

Having asserted that the Church does change and changes through its own volition, what does Rahner see as changing? To explore this, he draws a distinction between unchangeable and changeable elements in the Church.

For Rahner there are three areas of the Church's life which contain core factors that are not open to change: "there is an abiding corpus of dogma in the Church, an interpretation

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ *Changeable*, 3-4.

¹⁶⁴ Dulles addresses this nervousness also: "Fearing that the term "reform" had too negative a connotation, the Council spoke by preference of purification and renewal (renovatio)." Dulles, "True and False Reform."

¹⁶⁵ Rahner, *The Christian of the future*; translated by W. J. O'Hara.

of basic moral attitudes which has a permanent validity in Christian life (in other words an abiding Christian ethic) and a valid and permanent constitutional law of the Church."¹⁶⁶ In these areas, he does not see the Church as having "any right to introduce changes." Moreover: "In fact she explicitly denies that she has any such right, and recognizes herself in all this as bound by the single and definitive revelation of God in Jesus Christ."¹⁶⁷

However, and here arise immediate challenges, Rahner does not then believe that it is a simple process of dividing different elements into those that are changeable and unchangeable and then holding fast to certain things and not others. Because, for Rahner, the Church "is not simply an object of which we can achieve any empirical assurance with absolute certainty."¹⁶⁸ The unchangeable is to be found within the changeable and a "Christian cannot simply have and enjoy this unchangeable factor in its pure intrinsic essence. He must grasp it in a form which is changing, and so, under certain circumstances, in a form which has not already been made familiar to him by lifelong custom."¹⁶⁹ The treasure remains the same but the earthen vessels are always changing and the treasure cannot be found but in earthen vessels. It is a challenge to hold these concepts in tension. Rahner challenges us that it is "always the Church's task to carry over that which remains forever".¹⁷⁰ Yet at the same time, the horizon is a mystery, there cannot be anything immutable within history, so he rejects here the idea of a permanent natural law and certain concepts within neoscholastic theology.¹⁷¹

Our challenge becomes a little clearer, even if, following Rahner, we are only now assured of the difficulty of proceeding. However, if we can draw some of these distinctions between the changeable and unchangeable, using the methods that Rahner will furnish us with in Section Six, though there "is an unchangeable element in the Church", it can be "distinguished from much else which is changeable" and which is "under certain circumstances, capable of being reformed."¹⁷² Here Rahner introduces his idea that

¹⁶⁶ *Changeable*, 5.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.* And 7: "It follows from this statement that we must assign the changeable and unchangeable factors in the Church to different positions in the scale of verifiability with regard to the possibility of experiencing them in the concrete."

¹⁶⁹ *Changeable*, 20.

¹⁷⁰ Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come*, 24.

¹⁷¹ *Structural*, 116-117.

¹⁷² *Changeable*, 7.

“official functionaries” of the Church need then to proceed through a discernment of spirits. This will lead us into our considerations about methodology.

6. Rahner’s outline model for change

As we have seen, Rahner has an extensive theory about what is and is not changeable within the Church. How change is to come about then follows as a different matter. If we accept his argument so far, we might then ask what it is that we are meant to do. What could our model of change be if following Rahner?

In laying out what can be pieced together into an apparent process for approaching change (Rahner does not write a textbook nor is he programmatic), the first thing to note is that Rahner stresses the underlying “unforeseeability” of the future of the Church; he is keen never to be engaging in “futurology” as he terms it.¹⁷³ This unforeseeability is not merely brought about through our inability to predict and manage the future, however, as if with the advance of human knowledge we might make better predictions about the Church’s trajectory. Much more essentially, the “incalculability of the Church’s future is part of its nature and that of faith” and “is in fact a condition of the possibility of true freedom”.¹⁷⁴ As we saw earlier in Section Four, always already operating in the background of his thoughts here is his essential belief in the incomprehensible, unfathomable, mystery of God, who is the core of our being, but who is always ultimately unknowable. He sees, in fact, the theologian’s task as being, in part, to help humankind recognise this unknowability and reminding us that the future is always, ultimately to be approached as “a question”.¹⁷⁵ This will be an important point for us later, when thinking about how change might be practically conceived, and one that well serves to guard against those who might seek to overly ‘manage’ the Church and also predict what might happen in the future.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ “Church’s figure is ultimately an object of hope against hope and not a matter of futurology.” See also Karl Rahner, *Christian at the Crossroads*, ed. V. Green (London: Burns and Oates, 1975), 94. and *Future Church*, 108. Given that the concept has not remained regularly used by others, for where Rahner takes his understanding of futurology see *Question*, 181.

¹⁷⁴ *Future Church*, 109 and also Rahner, *Christian at the Crossroads*, 94-95. O’Donovan even argues that for Rahner this freedom has a collective dimension: “Freedom is not only the graced capacity to become finally oneself before God; it is, more comprehensively, the shared human capacity to forge a common future.” Leo O’Donovan, “A Journey into Time: The Legacy of Karl Rahner’s Last Years,” 637.

¹⁷⁵ *Question*, 182.

¹⁷⁶ For more on this and interesting reflections how biology and evolution proceed in a succession of causes, distinct from that which is creative and free, see *Question*, 186.

At first sight, however, this point also seems to bring us to a roadblock of inaction. If we cannot know or foresee the future, can we really do anything in response to shape it? Rahner foresees such a charge and therefore notes that such a characteristic should not be seen “as an unfortunate impediment for someone who wants to move into a future calculated in advance as accurately as possible”.¹⁷⁷ This point is both foundational to recall, but also makes a positive contribution to our approach in that, in freedom, the Church is able to be brought into the light “by itself and not by an advance calculation”. In surrendering to this unknowable future we are, in Rahner’s conception, embracing God’s “incomprehensibility and his freedom”.¹⁷⁸ For the Church of today, mired in what can often seem a fairly ‘hopeless’ state, it has an important role in reminding us that the future is not yet written.

He goes further in challenging us to action. Quoting in depth:

It will be noticed that in our considerations we have laid special emphasis upon the interactions between the changeable and the unchangeable elements in the Church, which is such that they can never fully or adequately be distinguished from one another. Clearly this does not imply any denial of the necessity of using our *utmost resources* to draw the necessary distinctions ever afresh between the changeable and the unchangeable elements in the Church, and at all levels of its existence, because without this it would be quite impossible for there to be any responsible historical development of the Church. Instead we would have to commit ourselves blindly to a process of change which unfolded at random or (in order to avoid this) we would have to adopt an attitude of false conservatism and proclaim as our ideal a state of absolute unchangeableness of the Church in all matters, even those of only relative importance.¹⁷⁹

An outcome of random change or false conservatism are clearly worries for Rahner, just as much as making mistakes along the journey.¹⁸⁰ He therefore leads us from this necessary moment of humble pause by remarking that “even though we cannot know anything about the substance of the Church’s concrete future, two statements at least

¹⁷⁷ *Future Church*, 109.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ *Changeable*, 21.

¹⁸⁰ See also Karl Rahner, "Experiment in the Church," *The Month* 231 (1971): 51.

may be made about this future". Firstly, that "the Church's future will be different in many respects" and secondly that "the future is that of the one and enduring Church in which we believe and live". He is here, in characteristic style, trying once more to break open the tradition but allow for the possibility of it being re-written completely, yet in continuity with and faithfulness to what has gone before. The paradox, or tension, is not at all dodged: "Change and endurance belong equally to the nature of the Church... we must always experience in history the unforeseeable miracle that the Church changes to a quite unforeseeable extent and yet discover that it has remained the same."¹⁸¹

He is not worried by this: "As in every society, so too in the Church, there will always be conservative *and* progressive trends, both of which in principle are necessary and useful when change must be combined with continuity."¹⁸² Noting an important distinction he has drawn earlier, with a keen eye to the sociological reality of the Church and not just its mystical nature, he is able to claim finally, though we can understand people's possible nervousness against such comments: "we can safely say that the Church of the future will look very different from that of today".¹⁸³ Finally, he tells us what he sees as the task of theology: "Theology, whether in the form of dogmatics, moral theology or canon law, invariably constitutes, from this point of view, the methodically directed and conscious attempt to distinguish between the unchangeable and the changeable."¹⁸⁴

The merits of planning

If that is our theological task, how shall we proceed? Before exploring Rahner's approach itself, one final note about the idea of planning will be helpful. We looked earlier at some of Rahner's comments about futurology, the future which in Rahner's mind we can even call God,¹⁸⁵ what we can know about the Church of tomorrow, and how, despite the unfolding mystery and unknowability of history, this does not stop us attempting to calculate a way forwards.

¹⁸¹ *Future Church*, 109.

¹⁸² *Structural*, 130.

¹⁸³ *Future Church*, 109.

¹⁸⁴ *Changeable*, 21. See too Conway's related comments, "Rahner's 'Tough Love' for the Church," 150-151.

¹⁸⁵ See Rahner's third proposed Creed in the Epilogue to *Foundations* Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: an Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978) and *Question*, 182, 190.

Changing this language slightly, in some of his later writings, Rahner then goes on to talk extensively about planning and advocates for the world-Church to “develop a global pastoral strategy”.¹⁸⁶ This may seem like new language for Rahner, emerging only in his final few years, but in it we find some of his firmest ideas about the future of the Church.¹⁸⁷ Particularly driving his thinking here is a reflection about the time in which he is now living (related to what we saw in Section Four): notably that the church is now a world-Church, but also that “secular planning for the world’s future is now taking place”. In an extension of ideas we saw from *Mission and Grace*, nearly twenty years earlier, but now developed: “Humanity’s future, in earlier times, was relatively unplanned. Concern was not for planning the future but living the present. That is not the case today – humanity *is* planning its future. Nature is no longer taken for granted but is viewed as material for building a sphere or existence.”¹⁸⁸ This “experiment with man” and the world is quite unique and leads into unknown territory.¹⁸⁹

In this future, with more planning, Rahner is nevertheless still keen to assert the sovereignty of freedom and also of shaping a new “faith consciousness” that can meet the challenges of the present age. The theme of a future full of surprises is present again, but now placed within the language of planning. A paradox returns though: “the Church in the world is the sacrament of the unplanned future because this future is the eternal incomprehensibility of God himself”.¹⁹⁰ Rahner even offers us some words that seem prophetic for our own moment of the church:

This does not mean that the Church should not plan its future – indeed, humanity can often see heaven most clearly when everything it has built collapses. Still, humanity must always seek to build better the house of its life. The Church must remain what it has always been, a Church of order, of active missionizing, of social flexibility and law – and also of human planning.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁶ Karl Rahner, “Planning the Church of the Future”, *Theology Digest* 30 No. 1 (1982), 59. From a 1981 lecture.

¹⁸⁷ Karl Rahner, “Planning the Church of the Future,” *Theology Digest* 30, no. 1 (1982).

¹⁸⁸ Rahner, “Planning the Church of the Future,” 60.

¹⁸⁹ Rahner, *Mission and Grace*, 200.

¹⁹⁰ Rahner, “Planning the Church of the Future,” 60.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

The tension again seems difficult to navigate and one wonders here from where he is picking up his ideas on planning. But they are clearly gaining purchase in his thinking about theory and practice.¹⁹² Exasperated almost, he says, seemingly dismayed at the number of things that the Church has accepted but yet to fully realise (e.g., its global nature), “[p]erhaps then some shift in moral emphasis should be a *planned* part of a global pastoral strategy.”¹⁹³ Furthermore, talking of the Church of the future: “should not this unavoidable change be something *planned*? We must not repeat the mistake of the past when, apparently, the church of the Fathers slipped unthinkingly into the church of medieval feudalism.”¹⁹⁴ These writings come very late in his career and are not much developed elsewhere, but they help frame some of the concepts we will explore.

A method

With the preceding as background, how as responsible theologians, using our utmost resources but whilst accepting God’s ultimate action, might we approach this ultimately unknowable future? Most notably for Rahner, only by walking the journey in the “venture of a Christian life”.¹⁹⁵ Rahner advocates that, however we approach the matter, “understanding is acquired only by believing, loving, committing ourselves, taking risks”.¹⁹⁶ With that as a general starting point, though he is not programmatic we can easily enough glean from Rahner his sense as to the dispositions with which we might proceed as a “Pilgrim Church”.¹⁹⁷ We will proceed through some of these fairly swiftly, especially those that are general virtues, before a discussion about a key concept of experimentation that appears regularly in his writings and offers us the most illuminating insights. We will be interested to see how much we might learn here about the Church’s contemporary period of diminishment and whether the paschal mystery plays a role in Rahner’s thinking.

The first disposition to adopt is that, in characteristically Ignatian fashion, we follow a method in tune with the “discernment of spirits”,¹⁹⁸ discernment which, given his wider

¹⁹² O'Donovan, "A Journey into Time: The Legacy of Karl Rahner's Last Years," 640.

¹⁹³ Rahner, "Planning the Church of the Future," 62.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ Rahner, *Opportunities for faith: elements of a modern spirituality*, ix.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ Some of this laid out in Rahner, *Opportunities for faith: elements of a modern spirituality*. Otherwise as referenced.

¹⁹⁸ See *Changeable*.

attitude, is rooted in prayer.¹⁹⁹ In his explicit writings on change he moves swiftly over this concept, but from Philip Endean and *Dynamics* we can see that Rahner's views here, hence his use of the term, are broadly Ignatian.²⁰⁰ We will, as Rahner, not dwell on exploring this further.

Secondly, it is clear that he counsels for matters to be examined individually and deeply.²⁰¹ He is ever reluctant in interviews to talk about topics about which he feels unqualified. And there is, moreover, in Rahner, always a desire to return to the root of things.²⁰²

Thirdly, he desires that we are courageous and hopeful, qualities he does not feel the Church in his own time often models.²⁰³ He counsels us in general virtues: the necessity of trust,²⁰⁴ in others, but also in the particular person of Jesus, and how we have a duty of dialogue.²⁰⁵ This though is not a dialogue which will ever fully and finally resolve discussion: "if a discussion of this kind is to be engaged in among Christians at all, it must constantly take into account and recognize the element of the unknown in the future that has to be planned for."²⁰⁶

He advocates too for the merits of being patient.²⁰⁷ When speaking of his own vocation and duty, we saw him earlier advocating that people "accept the moment", which is translated into his sense of a programme for change in the Church, drawing on Matthew 5-7, and not giving too much thought as to the morrow.²⁰⁸ Patience is allied to calmness, though a nuanced calmness:

not a stoical formula by which he secretly becomes the unassailable lord of his destiny. There really is a surrender embracing both action and passion which is granted to man; it is not perfected ideology. In that surrender, full of silent hope,

¹⁹⁹ See *I Remember*, 10.

²⁰⁰ See Michael Paul Gallagher, "Ignatian dimensions of Rahner's theology," *Lowain Studies* 29 (2004): 79-80.

²⁰¹ *Winty Season*, 183.

²⁰² Comments about *Shape of the Church to Come* in John Carmody, "Karl Rahner's Brave New Church," *America* 130 (1974). On the German Synod, he summarises that Rahner's critique is that "it did not try to be 'radical' or fundamental" and therefore "generated no capacity to separate primary issues from peripheral ones".

²⁰³ Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come*, 32. Also, *Structural*, 115. See also Conway, "Rahner's Tough Love for the Church," 153.

²⁰⁴ Rahner, *Opportunities for faith: elements of a modern spirituality*, 199.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 208-11.

²⁰⁶ *Question*, 201.

²⁰⁷ *Changeable*, 20.

²⁰⁸ Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come*, 46.

the Christian becomes aware of what is meant by God. But he also shares with all men everything that is human: responsible action as well as the suffering of the constant lesson that the future can never be fulfilled by man alone.²⁰⁹

Throughout the process, Rahner is well aware of the difficult trade-offs that might be necessary. It leads to slightly strange reflections in *Shape* where he has a cool response to the idea of missionary activity with Eskimos over missions to Japan and a concentration on evangelising to those who have most hope for the future, rather than merely maintenance of existing Church members. There is, creeping in, a sense of Rahner being captive to the numbers game at work here. Nevertheless, this need not concern us greatly here, more that he acknowledges a need to discern the use of resources wisely.

As we saw earlier, throughout these discussions, there is also for him a general acceptance of the historical trajectory of the world, as well as an acceptance of the limitations placed on all human lives.²¹⁰ He talks of frequent mistakes being made in pronouncements in the Church's self-understanding, not at its foundational core, but in key teachings nevertheless.²¹¹ He sees the potential for the development of the Church as running into historical 'dead-ends', and acknowledges the possibility of heresy and schism.²¹² He has, moreover, quite firm views on the way in which people may cease to belong to the Church in reality even whilst they may profess to belong to it as a social entity.²¹³ All this acknowledges that the method he is developing here is far from linear or perfect.

Finally, therefore, he offers us the concept of experimentation, which perhaps arises as the most interesting of his methodological suggestions. We will explore this in more depth in the next section as, linked to his Jesuit training, this concept has deep resonance for Rahner's views about the nature of change.

A final methodological point about decision making frames our summary here. We can see this in various ways in his thought, but given our later reflections on experimentation, which clearly have Jesuit roots, his discussion of the Spiritual Exercises is most helpful.

²⁰⁹ Rahner, *Christian at the Crossroads*, 95.

²¹⁰ *I Remember*, 103 and *Wintry Season*, 153.

²¹¹ *I Remember*, 98.

²¹² *Wintry Season*, 125.

²¹³ *Changeable*, 6.

He writes: "There is a general agreement that the nature of the Exercises is ultimately determined by the fact that a choice, a vital decision, is to be made in them."²¹⁴ Further: "The Exercises are guidance, regulations, instructions for something that is to be done by them. And what is to be done is to discover God's will in a decision to follow that will."²¹⁵

Therefore, to close this section on methodology we can see here Rahner asserting that during the process of change the importance of making a decision is paramount. Experiments, related to Exercises, are ultimately about making a decision, or an election in Ignatian language. Conway, writing of *Shape*, brings this together clearly for us:

Renewal requires the making of concrete decisions. Rahner complains that "It is in the details that we come up against both God and the devil, but the Church seems to be proclaiming only generalities." It is not acceptable that office-holders "put forward either merely colourless principles which upset no one or what are supposed to be their own private opinions, which, for that very reason, interest no one." Thus what is needed is for the Church both locally and globally to act with a level of decisiveness of historical significance. The reality is that all we know with certainty about the future is that it will be different from the present. However, the fact that we do not see the future clearly cannot be allowed to paralyse when it comes to planning for and implementing change.²¹⁶

Such a focus on decision making will be of interest in our conclusion when we return to reflect on the effectiveness of Vatican II. For now, we can note that Rahner envisages here a method of change that eventually takes shape within the lived life of the Church, where theory is manifest in practice. Change, for Rahner, falls short if it remains within the world of ideas.

Having seen a method for engaging with change in the Church, let us turn towards the key concept of experimentation before giving more consideration as to the adequacy of the method proposed.

²¹⁴ Karl Rahner, *The Dynamic Element in the Church* (Burns and Oates, 1964), 89.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ Eamonn Conway, "Rahner's Tough Love for the Church," 156.

7. Theological experimentation

Within a handful of Rahner's writings on change emerges his idea about experimentation. He gives some detailed reflection in *Opportunities for Faith* but it does not receive sustained treatment in *Theological Investigations*, nor *Foundations*. The concept, in Rahner's understanding, pulls together many of the earlier ideas we have seen about how he believes we should approach change. It emerges from this study as his most unique contribution and avenue for further reflection. What Rahner means by experimentation is not what we might ordinarily assume however. This will require some unpacking.

Firstly, we might at least wonder where he picks up these ideas from. The language is clearly in the air around him and he notes that: "Many Ecclesiastical documents concerning [various Church topics] allow and even recommend 'experiments'. But it seems not entirely clear in such documents just what these 'experiments' really are and what is being recommended."²¹⁷ But Rahner's sustained interest in bringing science and theology into dialogue seems to have some impact here too.²¹⁸ He is clearly, as we have seen earlier in Section Four, interested in the increased dominance of science in the modern world and keen to explore how some of its methods and processes might be brought into the theological process. His exploration of what experimentation means will draw on this scientific background. Yet his particular Jesuit background will also have given him a very particular lens through which to explore the idea of experiments. 'Experiments', from *experientias*, as Philip Endean reminds us, are rooted in the Jesuit charism in that they are the term given to essential components of Jesuit formation, from the time of the novitiate onwards, as stipulated by St. Ignatius from the time of the Constitutions.²¹⁹ They are, in short, a number of different placements, the most important of these being the Spiritual Exercises, which are designed to help a Jesuit novice and the Society of Jesus discern the leading of God in a novice's lives. Rahner sees experiments, rooted in the Exercises, and applying Ignatius's method of discernment of spirits as central to how the Church can make decisions and navigate the process of change.²²⁰

²¹⁷ Rahner, "Experiment in the Church."

²¹⁸ *I Remember*, 76.

²¹⁹ See Paul Nicolson, "Exercises, Experiments and Experiences: Tools for Ignatian Formation" *The Way*, 47/4 (October 2008), 77–92.

²²⁰ It will have certainly been the method that Rahner will have been most used to, particularly during the period of these writings after Vatican II and the Jesuits rediscovery of the roots of their charism.

Consequently, in terms of his exploration of the ideas of experimentation he notes, firstly, the scientific understanding of experimentation and then contrasts that with those experiments that are seen to operate in the Church.²²¹ He argues that ours is an age of experimentation, scientific and quantitative, but his view is different. He writes:

one might observe that since man exists as an historical being (and only in so far as he does) and since history as such is not really open to experimentation in the scientific sense which, when successful, makes possible certain and accurate predictions, it follows that in human affairs and human history, and consequently in the history of the Church, experimentation must have a different meaning, one which we will have to look for, assuming of course that there is such a thing as experiment in this area.²²²

He asks whether experimentation in the Church is to be a transitory thing or a “permanent condition that affects in a lasting way our mode of existence”, arguing that the assumed model of experimentation in the Church that people adopt is one in which experiments only need to be conducted for a short while, during the transition between one “clear, permanent, stable” state and the next. He is imagining here the idea that people might have that the purpose of a programme of experimentation after Vatican II is so that the Church might unpick the pre-Vatican II “old style of ecclesial life” and through experimentation eventually arrive at a new one. To put it another way, arguing that this is a particularly scientific model of experimentation, Rahner sees the aim in this mode “to arrive at knowledge which is abiding and assured making further experimentation in the same field superfluous”.²²³

Yet this is clearly not what he has in mind for experimentation in the Church. The Church will not reach a new permanent and stable state he argues. He makes an aside to acknowledge that certain, somewhat small-scale experiments might be conducted to arrive at a “definite result” for a course of action in the “near future” – e.g., are people taught better using one educational approach or another – but argues that this is also not a model that can operate more broadly for the Church. He goes as far as to suggest that the word may be “inadequate” and “misleading”. This makes his use of the word

²²¹ Rahner, "Experiment in the Church."

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid.

somewhat strange, especially when in his use of it elsewhere he does not give fuller reflections, but nevertheless, when using it, he is keen to convey a particular meaning.

Contrasting with the scientific method in which you can conduct an experiment without changing the whole of that which you are experimenting on (e.g., boiling a cup of water does not boil all water) he argues: “[b]ut experiment in the Church is an event within the Church herself, since there is no laboratory where experiments can take place, so to speak, alongside the Church. Even in the form of experiment the liturgy is really celebrated in a particular way, instruction is in fact given, other administrative practices are carried out.”²²⁴ He says “there is no experimentation, but only real ecclesial action and life” whereby “the reservation that it has to cease if it doesn’t work well does not alter the fact that the experiment results in the achievement of something seriously intended in the life of the Church which itself, in view of the one-way character of history, can never be retracted.”²²⁵

Whether Rahner’s characterisation of scientific experiments is fully accurate need not concern us here.²²⁶ That he has an interesting take on where experiments should lead is fruitful, however. The goal of a Church experiment he sees as radically different: “This means that we experiment not merely to know what is, but in order to learn by experience what we *want*.” This has very significant consequences for the process of managing change in the Church as for Rahner we don’t have a fixed goal we are working towards, but it is a question “of the experiment of freedom in which, as a result of a process of deliberation, a goal is chosen only by being devised.” The ability for God to speak in a radically creative and unexpected way must remain open.²²⁷ In experimenting we find the very essence and action of God, essence which is not fixed and pre-existing, but unfathomably open.²²⁸ He speaks of experiment being “autonomous”, outlining the extent to which he sees this as a moment of God acting in graced freedom.

²²⁴ Rahner, *Opportunities for faith: elements of a modern spirituality*, 215-16. In a Chapter entitled “Experiment in the Field of Christianity and the Church”, a different translation but the same text as in *The Month* 231.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 216.

²²⁶ See Peter Hodgson, "Experiment in the Church," *New Blackfriars* 53, no. 626 (1972). His critique accepts Rahner’s views on experiments in the church, just sees them as more closely related to the scientific method than Rahner perhaps realises.

²²⁷ O'Donovan, "A Journey into Time: The Legacy of Karl Rahner's Last Years," 638.

²²⁸ Rahner, *Opportunities for faith: elements of a modern spirituality*, 217.

In fact, all of history is an experiment for Rahner and he draws us back once again to the courageous way in which it needs to be approached: "Church history is the most radical experiment: where it is not, where it becomes nervous traditionalism, it may perhaps still be the history of sinful man in the Church, but no longer of the Church as she ought to be according to the will of Jesus."²²⁹ Once again we are to become aware of living in a different age for such history and the impact this might have on our experimenting:

What is or at least ought to be *new* in experiments in the Church today is the fact that we are *reflectively* aware of this experimental character of the Church's life and history: we are no longer merely enduring it, but we are expressly aware of it, try deliberately to foster it, actively and methodically strengthen it and thus attempt to speed it up.²³⁰

Chiming with thoughts earlier in Section Four about the ability of humankind to shape its destiny in the modern era, Rahner sees experiment as the key way in which we might plan our way towards the future:

If in general history today by comparison with the past is in a radically new sense a *planned* history, then so too must be the history of the Church. And experiment in the narrower sense within the Church is the very way in which surrender to the incomprehensible, uncontrollable Lord of history *and* the duty of planning the future are united in a singular way.²³¹

Through experiment, we are able to discover what is changeable and what is unchangeable, what in fact is true and permanent in the life of the Church.

Thereafter, having offered some reflections on the nature of experiment, he critiques experiment in the Church of his day, where the ecclesiastical legislator's form of experiment is purely selective and not creative, merely offering a number of choices, already known about, from which to choose.²³² Experiment, however, is in fact the very form through which the Church transitions through history. It is therefore always to be

²²⁹ Ibid., 218.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid., 220.

in a state of experiment. In some final reflections he discusses the nature of authority and how one might frame experiments within the Church. He argues that there will need to be an element of the use of conscience, not all experiments will be sanctioned from above, that there will be “unrest, venture, and even an element of conflict”.²³³

In summary, in experimentation we find many of Rahner's ideas about change in the Church coming together. O'Donovan sees this as part of his wider project of the later years: “Rahner's last works, if not in a decisively new way, then at least with growing insistence, emphasize the *conversio ad Phantasma per tempus* and the even more profound *conversio cordis ad Deum* which all philosophical and theological reflection is meant to serve.”²³⁴ Whether this method is implementable in practice is something we will consider in the next section.

8. Possible critiques of method and ideas

It is hard to diagnose an absence in Rahner's methodology for change, but yet our claim has been that in his ideas for reform not being fully realised there lurk potential weaknesses; not perhaps weaknesses that he could have easily addressed, but ones that nevertheless leave an ongoing task for us. Yet, the ideas he draws on, from calling for the discernment of spirits, being courageous, open to the future, experimental, faithful, are all worthily offered. Few programmes for change could dispute that these would be helpful to us today and the dioceses we are considering could do worse than evaluating their efforts against these as a set of methodological criteria. Nevertheless, despite finding much to commend from what we have seen in Rahner's methodology for change, where might we find potential areas for improvement?

The first point to address, is that, within his overall writings, despite the foregoing, Rahner in fact gives relatively little regard to the question of exactly how change might come about in the Church. We have managed to piece together a sense of a methodology from across the corpus, but there is, in his fullest writings about the Church of the future, almost no time given to detailed procedural concerns. In *Shape*, for example, having painted a picture of the Church of today (Part One: Where do we stand?), and offering

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ O'Donovan, "A Journey into Time: The Legacy of Karl Rahner's Last Years," 644. *Translation: Returning to the image through time and Conversion of the heart to God*

thoughts on the Church of the future (Part Three: How can a Church of the Future be Conceived?), the second part of the book (What are we to do?) turns our attention towards practical questions. However, though it contains many fruitful reflections about areas of Church life (A Declericalized Church, A Church concerned with Serving, Morality, an Open Church, a Church of Real Spirituality) there is scant attention paid to how we might move towards this Church of the future. The early part of the work counsels the German Synod in some particular ways (for example that they should attend to issues at their root and from first principles) but the reflections are certainly not extensive. Whilst therefore such a work makes for very interesting reading today, it leaves us with few tools, other than some of those outlined earlier in Sections Six and Seven, to guide our thinking. He does not give much regard as to how to address the various political challenges he foresees and ideas such as experimentation are given very little coverage in his wider works. His fullest writings on the topic, moreover, are buried in a short article that is not included within *Theological Investigations*. There is not much sense, therefore, in his writings, of him having put these ideas into practice and tested the results, thereafter deepening his reflections. The caveat remains about whether would have been possible, given the stage of his career that these writings appear, but the task for others may still remain.

Resignation, sadness or over confidence?

A first question that might arise in this context, is whether Rahner, regardless of the time available to him, would have even seen merit in a task to lay out more detailed procedural issues. Karen Kilby touches on this:

what I find the most striking in Rahner is not the accuracy of his prediction of a diminishment to come, but the calmness with which he makes this prediction. There is no sense of hand-wringing. There is no anxiety to apportion blame—on failures in Church strategy, or the evils of modernity, or anywhere else. Even more striking, there is no proposal of a strategy to ward off the coming diminishment...There is an acceptance that things happen for reasons which at least in part are much larger than anything within Church control. There are things he thinks the Church should do differently because of the situation, ways

it can aim to fulfil its mission more fully within it, but the recommendations are not predicated on supposing the situation can be prevented or reversed.²³⁵

Kilby argues that part of an appropriate response, in a development of Rahner's thought, might be to approach the current moment of the Church's life with sadness: "Mourning, sadness, loss—none of these can be the last word, I think, in Christian theology. But without acknowledging that a loss really is a loss, that diminishment is not, in itself, a good, we may distort our capacity to think well."²³⁶

Navigating the tension in Rahner's thought, and reading his emotions, is not at all easy here, as we saw when exploring his theological approach in Section Three. He is accepting, even embracing, of the Church's new existence as the 'little flock'. However, Kilby also writes elsewhere about Rahner's potential over-optimism about the future: "One gets a sense at points like this that Rahner, for all his talk of the uncertainty and the darkness and the unknowability of the future, was, for a period at least, pretty confident that whatever minor setbacks and resistance there might be, things were and inescapably had to be moving in a particular direction."²³⁷ One might even characterise his response as optimistic about the trajectory of the world, but generally pessimistic about the trajectory of the Church in his period. Kilby is keen not to overstress his enthusiasm for this period of the Church's life, how his theory of the anonymous Christian should not be read as a triumphalist attempt to capture the world for Christendom, but to help believers realise that all is not lost when their friends and relatives are no longer consciously affiliated members of the Church. Yet we can certainly see various emotions at play at different times: resignation, irritation, sadness, calmness, enthusiasm. So much we might expect, it highlights at least that all emotional responses are acceptable, and might be useful to us as we proceed today. It leaves us a little confused, however, as to what Rahner's response to our current times would actually have been.

Rahner on theory and praxis

At least on one level, some weakness in approach seems conditioned by not giving enough time to matters of applied practice. There is no political theology in *Foundations*

²³⁵ Kilby, *Belief, Unbelief and Mystery*.

²³⁶ Kilby, *Mystery and the Contours of the Church: Revisiting Rahner*

²³⁷ Karen Kilby, "Karl Rahner's Ecclesiology," *New Blackfriars* 90, no. 1026 (2009): 193, 95.

and concerns about how his work was received, as we saw earlier in Section Three, seem somewhat secondary for Rahner. It seems too, from what we have seen, that many of these ideas were emergent for Rahner towards the end of his life. Leo O'Donovan argues that these thoughts deepen for him in later years and we see in *Faith in a Wintry Season* reflections about what was incomplete in his task. In the mid-1970s he flags this up in an interview, saying that the relationship between theory and praxis "hasn't been clearly articulated in theology". Further: "Western theology, not that I've made it any better, has given preference to theory." The critique is deepened: "It hasn't adequately taken into account the autonomous freedom of praxis, concrete historicity, experiments, and the logic of existential decision-making."²³⁸ He sees the theologian's task as, in part, critiquing practical ideas once they emerge in the Church, but clearly sees the work to bring theory and praxis as yet unfinished.

We cannot explore in detail here why this is the case. Yet it is easy to see how a certain 'relaxedness', conditioned by Rahner's views about our ultimately being held in God, which feeds his well-known work on anonymous Christianity, also feeds into his discussions on change. Did Rahner, with his ever-optimistic outlook, ultimately fail to grapple with the nature of putting theory into practice?

Living his methodology concretely

It is perhaps in an area that Rahner was very keen to be aware of, that of how God's plan unfolds within history, that his methodology ultimately struggles to be the vehicle of change that he would so desire. Rahner writes: "in the concrete it is not so simple to decide where the distinction is to be drawn between changeable and unchangeable factors in the Church".²³⁹ He does not fall foul of his own critique that others "put forward either merely colourless principles which upset no one or what are supposed to be their own private opinions, which, for that very reason, interest no one." Nevertheless, there is a sense that in merely stating his ideas and not giving enough consideration to how they might be taken up, he falls short and does not fully grasp the way in which the Church unfolds in history.

²³⁸ *Wintry Season*, 30.

²³⁹ *Changeable*, 7.

Power and praxis

Related to these issues, Rahner is well aware of how some things may not come to pass, yet it may be questioned whether he is sufficiently interested in the exercise of power, and the effectiveness of power. He was clearly involved in the life of the Church, at Vatican II, the German Synod, the International Theological Commission, and cannot be accused of not trying to affect change. He seems to have been well aware of the limitations to his approach. Yet there are clearly important questions of authority and governance to be covered here. Rahner comments on these matters directly, exploring ideas of synodality, collegiality, Papal infallibility and the *Sensus Fidelium*. However, from our previous analysis, praxis for Rahner seems substantially about experimentation. But does he then miss out issues around power, about campaigning for change, about breaking down barriers, about how to bring change about in a context where structural sin exists?

There is of course a debate about how personal reform may need to come before institutional reform, which Dulles speaks for. A reclaiming of Christological and mystagogical insights no doubt also has something to say and would add depth, as we will explore in our conclusions, in ensuring that any programme for reform is not too 'managerial'.²⁴⁰ Yet, from what we've explored, Rahner's methodology seems well able to be open to the richness required here in being open to the fullest mystery of God in Christ and so it would warrant supplementing further.

Making Rahner's method truly transformative

We have noted earlier that Rahner was explicit about his methodological limitations.²⁴¹ We will not try immediately to improve Rahner's methodology here, our purpose has been largely diagnostic so far. But diagnostic with a key purpose, to suggest some reasons why one post-Vatican II theologian's ideas are still struggling to find purchase within the Church. We will make some steps towards meeting this challenge in later chapters.

²⁴⁰ See Anthony Atansi, *The Body of Christ: Retrieving the Christological Core for Ecclesial Renewal and Reform – Reflections from Ratzingerian and Williamsian Perspectives*. (Presentation at the International Conference Leuven Encounters in Systematic Theology, 2017).

²⁴¹ *Structural*, 115.

9. Conclusion

Given his theological method, the period during which he wrote, and the limitations of any one individual, even if Rahner's full ambitions for Church renewal were not realised, he clearly stands as making a substantial contribution to Catholic understandings of change and reform. Rahner was not surprised by the situation of the Church at the time of his death, nor, though he would likely still be calling for change, would he be worried by the condition of the Church now.²⁴² Nevertheless, the question must linger as to how we are to approach change in our contemporary landscape, in particular the material change being dealt with in this study. For our own topic, Rahner's framework for change in the Church, whether in diminishment or not, is a useful foundation. We have not yet attended to the paschal mystery, which is lacking in these of Rahner's writings, but now have a fuller framework in which to situate that constructive task.

Echoing G.K. Chesterton, Philip Endean writes, in reflecting on the future of Rahnerian theology: "It is not that Rahner's theology has been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and therefore not really tried."²⁴³ Is the reason for Rahner's theology not being fully realised, as simple a question as one of degrees of difficulty?

As we have explored, yes and no. Some of Rahner's principles for changes in the Church are undoubtedly demanding to follow faithfully. However, it seems unlikely that realising Rahner's theological ideas is just about trying a little harder. Rahner was aware of this, writing that the Church's "wintry climate cannot be overcome simply proclaiming high ideals and acting as if they could be realized with a little goodwill."²⁴⁴ His prognosis tails off a little though here. Surveying his writings as a whole and from what we have seen here, Rahner seems a little unclear as to what he sees as to the barriers to progress.²⁴⁵ The Bishops are a particular target,²⁴⁶ but Metz's critique would also introduce relationships of power, that change often does not come about in the world because of embedded social relations that conspire against it. Others might point to Rahner not paying sufficient regard to sin more generally within the Church.²⁴⁷ So too we have explored

²⁴² *Wintry Season*, 186 and Rahner, Herron, and Albrecht, *The Church after the Council*, 29-30

²⁴³ Philip Endean, "Has Rahnerian Theology a Future?" in *The Cambridge companion to Karl Rahner*. Edited by Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines. (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 282.

²⁴⁴ *Wintry Season*, 5.

²⁴⁵ At least in the next part of that quote.

²⁴⁶ See comments in Carmody, "Karl Rahner's Brave New Church," 109-11.

²⁴⁷ Leo O'Donovan, "A Journey into Time: The Legacy of Karl Rahner's Last Years," 639.

how Rahner's methodology with regard to theory and practice was clearly developing towards the end of his life; most of the writings we have explored here are from after 1970. We cannot know exactly what would have been Rahner's reaction to the way in which the Church developed in decades following his death, how and if he would have developed his methodology further.²⁴⁸ That Rahner only begins to wrestle more deeply with question of 'how' towards the end of his life, in dialogue with changes post-Vatican II, liberation theology and some of his followers, situates him within his own particular times.

There was so much and such rapid change in the years after Vatican II that perhaps the initial expectation was that this period of 'unfreezing' would continue for a good while yet.²⁴⁹ Though Rahner was already saying in *Shape* that the Council was out of date, there is a clear sense of the possibilities for change.²⁵⁰ And he was no maverick, but must have seriously believed certain changes could happen in his lifetime. For a short period in the early 1970s, the journal *Concilium* optimistically carried the subtitle *Theology in the Age of Renewal*. The story that the pace of change was not to last is well known.²⁵¹ Events between Rome and the Jesuits after Pedro Arrupe's stroke in 1981 and during Rahner's final years certainly reflected the fragility of many of the changes for which he had called.²⁵² Rahner, at the end of his life, is clearly aware of this, and seems sanguine. He talks of the dying down of euphoria after the Council, that following key breakthroughs "you get back to the routine and the less spectacular".²⁵³ He is still animated by the same questions and desires but is well aware of the slowing of change. Whether an appeal to returning to the routine is a *post hoc* rationalisation, we have not sought to examine here, though it echoes what we have seen as an, at times, fairly passive disposition (or resigned attitude?) towards unfortunate outcomes. Rahner argues frequently elsewhere that we now live in a world of faster changes. Why should the Church be any different, we might want to ask him. If the future is ultimately unknowable the Church could, one imagines,

²⁴⁸ O'Donovan remarks that "In these last years he deepens and broadens his thought on the relations between theory and practice". O'Donovan, "A Journey into Time: The Legacy of Karl Rahner's Last Years," 624.

²⁴⁹ To use Kurt Lewin's language.

²⁵⁰ He makes certain claims for changes in his lifetime that few theologians would have felt worthwhile voicing in the few decades after his death, e.g., that the office of bishop could be held collectively rather than by an individual.

²⁵¹ See Rahner's comments in *I Remember*, 93.

²⁵² *Wintry Season*, 80-81.

²⁵³ *Wintry Season*, 197.

move as fast as the rest of the world, and not be stuck in its ways as he seems to suggest.²⁵⁴ It is therefore interesting to see a slowing of the pace of change in the Church and to wonder what Rahner's full critique of that would be.²⁵⁵ Clearly by the end of his life he recognised periods of faster and slower change, but did he fully appreciate the roadblocks that stood in the way? Rahner expected others to continue his thinking though. That his 'programme for action' falls somewhat short, leaves the task unfinished.

Perhaps to end, the final words should go to Rahner: "For many Christians the present period of change in the Church is very upsetting. Some feel that a cosy home has fallen about their ears. They find themselves on the inhospitable street. Others feel that the Church is crawling into the future at a snail's pace and they become restive."²⁵⁶ From what we saw in the Introduction, these words seem apt for us today. As Rahner often reminds us, a debate about the purpose of the Church will loom throughout our further explorations. We will continue in the subsequent chapters to wrestle with how to conceive and birth change better, turning now in particular to the paschal mystery.

²⁵⁴ He seems aware of this, as Kilby notes, quoting him in *Shape*, but his attitude seems more resigned to the idea that the Church will not take the lead: "The leadership of the Church has a choice, then, either to see the change that is coming about, and really grapple with it, or to continue tending to the 'remnants' of Volkskirche, 'resisting decisions in favour of the future until they are extorted from it, running groaning behind developments instead of leading'" Kilby, *Mystery and the Contours of the Church: Revisiting Rahner*

²⁵⁵ *I Remember*, 90.

²⁵⁶ Rahner, *Christian at the Crossroads*, 7.

Chapter 3: Paschal change and diminishment: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Rahner's *Theology of Death*

1. Introduction

With a sense of Rahner's approach to ecclesial change in the background, we can turn now to theological reflections which seem particularly apt for a Church which faces diminishment and death of certain expressions of its life, and therefore the central constructive reflections of this thesis.

The core question which we have been working towards concerns how paradigmatic the full arc of the paschal mystery might be (notably, through death) for an ecclesiology of institutional Church diminishment. Rahner has helped us explore a more generalised ecclesiology of change, highly appropriate for the Church at all times, but one which only obliquely touches on the fact of institutional decline and paschal considerations. However, there were some in the literature review who began to open up this question more fully (e.g., Dunn, Rosemann, Jenkins). We will therefore turn now to Hans Urs von Balthasar to explore matters directly; his writings about the paschal mystery, most especially in *Mysterium Paschale*, explicitly claim a Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday path for the Church. We complement this with further reflections from Rahner about the theology of death; though not linked to his ecclesiology explicitly, he talks about death as fulfilment, in which we are compelled to participate with Christ and extensions of his thought will be fruitful.

The genesis of such a question about the paschal mystery and its implications are manifold. Firstly, there is the connection between the path of the individual believer and the corporate life of the Church. If taking up one's cross, walking the Via Dolorosa and death (in different forms) in the sure hope of new life are unavoidable in a fully-realised vocational journey for Christians (cf. Luke 9:23, Romans 8:36, Galatians 2:20), we will want to ask to what extent this also applies to the Church or churches in, as Dunn pointed towards, models of "communal spirituality". It is not a link we have found made by many ecclesiologists, and not one made in any depth. Balthasar and Rahner complement each

other in pursuit of what a process so central to the life of the individual Christian believer means at the corporate level.

Secondly, we are interested in apparently different types of death and new life which the Church might face. To unpack this further: in institutional diminishment there is a sense that the Church, in certain forms, faces moments of death (a religious order closes when all its members have died, a parish church is sold, believers can no longer be found in a certain geographical area) or is even in a more general state of dying and diminishment. To what extent, however, is this process passive or active? To what extent is such death 1) 'organic', 'natural' or 'a law of human existence' 2) thrust upon the Church, perhaps as a consequence of its own or others sinfulness, or 3) freely and consciously undertaken, a choice for life which in fact involves an end?²⁵⁷ How the Church might approach different types of death is therefore significant. Touching on martyrdom, but wary of glorifying suffering, we will explore the extent to which Jesus ultimately lovingly, but in terror, steps forward into death and the Church might be called to do the same. Rahner especially will have worthwhile things to tell us here. As he writes about the significance of the topic:

if we do not wish to suffer death, around us and in ourselves, merely passively and in dull resignation; if as men, as spiritual beings, we must, and prefer to, face death with alert hearts and open eyes...then a theology of death... is both important and desirable.²⁵⁸

Though Rahner is writing about individual deaths, the leap to theological reflections on the death of the Church or a church is easy enough to make and we will develop this below. Such reflections both return us to the *ars moriendi* referred to in Chapter One, but might also help jolt us from any state of denial about institutional death which we will see quite regularly surrounding diocesan planning processes in the next chapter.

Beyond death, when thinking about new life, and to avoid falling into a trap that sees new life from death as a linear process, this exploration also makes us particularly attentive to movements of grace. For example, we noted in the introductory chapter how

²⁵⁷ All this language is Rahnerian and will be reviewed in more detail below.

²⁵⁸ Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, ed. C. H. Henkey, *Quaestiones disputatae*; 2, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) 10.

the *World Council of Churches'* New Delhi statement of 1961 contained a call that the future of the Church would involve “nothing less than a death and rebirth of many forms of church life as we have known them”. A subtle link seems being made here to the paschal mystery as the subsequent line refers to sacrifice: “we believe that nothing less costly can finally suffice”.²⁵⁹ However, “rebirth” is interesting phrasing, quite different to “resurrection”, perhaps closer to the idea of being “born again”, or even reincarnation. We are therefore also interested in different forms of new life, which, for now, we will characterise as ‘organic’ (natural), ‘artificial’ (willed through power by sinful man) and ‘resurrectional’ (graceful), all of which we might see in the world, but which retain some difference. This returns us to some of the discussion of Chapter One where “resurrection” was ascribed by certain commentators to growth and new life in the Church, when in fact this apparent new life may or may not be something entirely different. We will not be able to address expressions of new life particularly extensively, but some regard for seed which sprouts quickly and withers versus seed which produces a hundredfold must be born in mind. Rahner again, will be useful to our discussions. Finally, of course, to round off the paschal mystery, there is also the waiting of Holy Saturday. We will explore this with Balthasar, it perhaps being the day that the contemporary Church is most keen to speed over, theologically and also pastorally.²⁶⁰

If such questions lie behind this chapter, we correspondingly want to see the implications of the arguments developed. Linking directly to our contemporary moment, whilst both Balthasar and Rahner move our thinking forwards we will explore where their work might be taken further and where there are potential pitfalls to their approaches. The closer we are to discussing the sociological reality of the Church and current pastoral practice, as happens in the next chapter, the keener we are to see our theological commentators making links between contemporary issues and their theoretical work explicitly.²⁶¹ We will be interested to what extent Balthasar and Rahner link arguments to their own sociological reality, as both were living in a period in which the institutional diminishment of the Church had already commenced. We will discover little here, and that neither can quite be applied directly to our topic; any use of their ideas will therefore

²⁵⁹ Braaten and Jenson, eds., *In One Body Through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity. A Call to the Churches from an Ecumenical Study Group*, 22.

²⁶⁰ Lewis comments how until 1956 it was not uncommon for Easter Sunday liturgies to happen as early as the morning of Holy Saturday. Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: a Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 2.

²⁶¹ Though that may of course not have been their aim, as we will see with Balthasar.

need some translation to our current context. As we have noted, Rahner, moreover, in the writings we have explored, does not make the link in his explorations of death to the corporate life of the Church at all.

Finally, as we proceed we will be keen to avoid a sense in which we might glory in suffering and have a mistaken view about the importance of death. The risk with some of this literature is that it may fall into some of the pitfalls about *kenosis* and suffering which Kilby and Tonstad have been so keen to diagnose.²⁶² Balthasar has been particularly critiqued here. It is where you find those such as James Dunn suggesting that the Church can “even be put to death”, which lies far from the intents of Rahner and Balthasar on close reading, but is certainly an ever-present risk.

The chapter will begin with Balthasar, continue with Rahner and then explore potential weaknesses to their approaches as well as look at areas in which the thinking needs taking further. We will not explore Balthasar's whole project in depth but look for key ecclesial links; Rahner's understanding of death will come under more scrutiny. Finally, so as not to stunt the style, we will not always explicitly make the link between the possible death of individuals and the possible death of the Church. But we are presuming, unless stated, that when Rahner or Balthasar are referring to the death of an individual, then such a concept can be applied to a corporate body as well.²⁶³ Some more explanation for this will be given below and where modifications would be required we will make that clear.

2. *Mysterium Paschale*

Balthasar's key contribution for us is to make sense of the idea of talking about the death of the Church. Therefore, whether consciously phrased as such or not, or even a coincidence of the translation, the following perhaps stands out most directly as relevant to our topic in *Mysterium Paschale*. Having outlined the nature of Christ's death and its relationship to the Church Balthasar writes:

²⁶² Tonstad, *God and Difference: the Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude*; Karen Kilby, "Julian of Norwich, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and the Status of Suffering in Christian Theology," *New Blackfriars* 99, no. 1081 (2018).

²⁶³ We echo too Rahner's fear that such a discussion might appear to reduce the significance of death to “a phantom web of concepts” but think the effort worthwhile regardless. *On Death*, 10.

This *com-passio* is, therefore, part and parcel of his essential legacy to his Church, and makes it possible for her to survive the hiatus of that day when 'God is dead'.²⁶⁴

The *com-passio* to which Balthasar refers is the Church's own sharing in Christ's suffering, where it is "co-crucified" "through the sheer fact of her existence and the logic of her faith".²⁶⁵ Balthasar may be referring solely to the God being dead of Holy Saturday (he has already been speaking of an Old Testament 'Church-before-the-Church' and the Church being born on the cross), but this also describes well our own period of the Church's life. We have lived with the "death of God" for a long time in so-called western countries. One of Christ's most loving acts Balthasar suggests is to allow us a sharing in the cross, which may allow the Church to "survive" its own contemporary moments of death. This will need some exploring. We will not be able to cover the whole ground of what Balthasar develops in *Mysterium Paschale*, but we can draw out those points that are most essential for his ecclesiology.²⁶⁶

Good Friday and Holy Saturday

How we might conceive of God present in a corpse is perhaps the most arresting question Balthasar poses us.²⁶⁷ How we might conceive of God in a dead Church would be the extension of the thought. Rowan Williams lays this out particularly vividly:

If Jesus is the self-communication of God in flesh, then the cry of dereliction from the Cross is a communication of the selfhood of God: God is revealed when there is nothing to be said about God, nothing to be said about God by God incarnate. In *Mysterium Paschale*, Balthasar sets out with an astonishingly powerful clarity the necessary centrality to the work of Christ of this 'hiatus' represented by the silence of Holy Saturday. 'It is for the sake of this day that the Son became man' (MP, 49).²⁶⁸

²⁶⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: the Mystery of Easter* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 133.

²⁶⁵ MP, 134.

²⁶⁶ In general we found Balthasar's ecclesiology a somewhat neglected area of study.

²⁶⁷ Ronald W. Roschke, "Review of *Between Cross and Resurrection* by Alan Lewis", *Word & World* 24/4, Fall 2004, 456.

²⁶⁸ Rowan Williams, "Balthasar and the Trinity," in *For the life of the world: Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Church as Eucharist*, ed. Nicholas Healy and David L. Schindler (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 37.

De Lubac also sees as the essence of Balthasar's thought that which is found in his writings on Holy Saturday, and more generally we can see the focus on the paschal event.²⁶⁹ The language is stark, but unavoidably central to Balthasar's conception of the Church. The paschal event, rather than, for example, Pentecost, is key. For the "thrust of the lance on Golgotha is in some manner the sacrament of the spiritual thrust that wounds the Word and so spreads it everywhere.... The Word of God cast into our world is the fruit of this unique wound."²⁷⁰ He is not alone in arguing this and draws heavily on the Johannine narrative. Nevertheless, the cross, for Balthasar is undoubtedly the wellspring and birth of the Church.

However, before we continue, we must acknowledge that in interpreting Balthasar where to place our attention is always a little tricky. Nichol's notes how Balthasar finds his interest in "an unusual place" that of "Christ's Descent into Hell" though seems to struggle to decide whether this should be the "consummate icon of what God is like" or more a completing of the picture afforded by Good Friday.²⁷¹ Our reading of Balthasar, backed up by his own clarifications, as we will see later, place Holy Saturday centrally, but without clouding out other aspects of the paschal mystery. There is in Balthasar always the holding together of codeterminate and paradoxical absolutes; the Church for example is both born on the cross and requires the cross, but so does it require resurrection and the "living presence of the Lord".²⁷² The *whole* Easter event "makes itself incessantly actual now".²⁷³ Balthasar himself acknowledges this: turning to Barth he explores how in *kenosis* and projections of this into the Trinity it is possible to overcome the "opposition between a *theologia crucis* and a *theologia gloria*."²⁷⁴ We cannot explore here whether the kenotic moves he makes here are true. However, we can at least acknowledge that his project does not remain solely with the cross or Holy Saturday. He wants to point in Christ to a unity, not paradox. With our own usual sense of time unfolding linearly, and our post-resurrection perspective, this is challenging. It needs holding any particular

²⁶⁹ Kilby sees a focus in Balthasar on cross and Rahner on incarnation. For Kilby, Balthasar "reproaches Rahner for a failure to take sin seriously enough, or to give a sufficiently important place to the Cross." Karen Kilby, "Balthasar and Karl Rahner," in *For the life of the world: Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Church as Eucharist*, ed. Nicholas Healy and David L. Schindler (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 258.

²⁷⁰ Quoted by Henri de Lubac in "A Witness of Christ in the Church: Hans Urs von Balthasar," 1988, <https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/hans-urs-von-balthasar-eulogy-de-lubac/> [accessed 30 March 2020].

²⁷¹ *MP*, 7.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 191.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 215.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

moment of the paschal mystery lightly, always ready to be transformed by another moment of the mystery;²⁷⁵ Balthasar encourages us to a perspective of contemplation, not just waiting “until the scene changes”.²⁷⁶ Rahner’s concept of death will be no less tricky to get to grips with but these are important caveats to have in mind.

Nevertheless, the centrality of Christ’s death and the importance for us of dwelling on this repeatedly will reverberate for Balthasar.²⁷⁷ His ecclesiology will be rooted in his sense of death and descent. For example, the Dunn writing we saw earlier, which talks of the true Spirit, only if it is a Spirit of Christ, united in his life, and death, is either drawn from Balthasar or very closely mirrors his thought: “These two hands... do not work next to one another, or after one another (as though the Spirit comes only when Christ’s work is finished), but with and in one another, so that the Spirit is always the Spirit of Christ”.²⁷⁸

Again, for Balthasar on Holy Saturday, starkly: “There was a day when Nietzsche was right: God was dead, the Word was not heard in the world, the body was interred and the tomb sealed up, the soul descended into the bottomless abyss of Sheol.”²⁷⁹ Whilst we might wonder at de Lubac claiming that this descent into hell “prolonged in some manner the cry from the Cross: Why have you abandoned me?” the movement of Balthasar’s ideas are clear. “Nobody could ever shout that cry from a deeper abyss than did he whose life was to be perpetually born of the Father.”²⁸⁰ Christ, in descending to the dead, redeems death from within. For the individual believer, this has remarkable consequences. De Lubac writing of Balthasar:

In conformity to the mission he has received, the prayerful man then experiences the feeling that “God is dead for him”. And this is a gift of Christian grace — but one receives it unawares. The lived and felt faith, charity, and hope rise above

²⁷⁵ Mike Higton on the way Rowan Williams writes is a good guide to how we might approach this. See Mike Higton, “Rowan Williams”, in Paul Avis (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2018), 508.

²⁷⁶ *MP*, 6, 50.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 12-20. In particular also, *ibid.*, 22 where Balthasar refers to the “modern myth...that Christianity is above all an ‘incarnationalism’: a taking root in the (profane) world, and not a dying to the world.”

²⁷⁸ *Theo-Logic* III, 169. Quoted in Nicholas Healy and David L. Schindler, eds., *For the life of the world: Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Church as Eucharist* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 55.

²⁷⁹ Quoted de Lubac in “A Witness of Christ in the Church: Hans Urs von Balthasar.”

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

the soul to an inaccessible place, to God. From then on it is “in nakedness, poverty and humiliation” that the soul cries out to him.²⁸¹

We will relate this to the death of the Church in a moment, though it is clearly challenging to the Church in encouraging it to prayerfully receive the idea that “God is dead”. De Lubac goes on to claim, almost skating over suffering: “Those who have experienced such states afterwards, more often than not, in their humility, see nothing in them but a personal purification.”²⁸² It is here, as we will see later, that we would want to proceed a little cautiously.

Moving to ecclesial ground, de Lubac then interprets Balthasar as follows:

True to his doctrine which refuses to separate charisms and gifts of the Holy Spirit, the ecclesial mission, and individual mysticism, von Balthasar discerns in it essentially this “Holy Saturday of contemplation” by which the Betrothed, in some chosen few of her members, is made to participate more closely in the redemption wrought by the Spouse. We have arrived at a time in history when human consciousness, enlarged and deepened by Christianity, inclines more and more to this interpretation.²⁸³

This moment of institutional diminishment for the Church is therefore for Balthasar in the eyes of de Lubac a “sombre experience of Holy Saturday”, “the price to be paid for the dawn of the new spring of hope, this spring which has been “canonized in the rose garden of Lisieux””. Holy Saturday, the descent, the feeling of absolute foresakenness from God is in fact for Balthasar “the beginning of a new creation? The magic of Holy Saturday ... Deep cave from which the water of life escapes.”²⁸⁴

In *Mysterium Paschale* Balthasar does not in fact make the connection to this historical moment of the Church's life. However, what he outlines serves as an ecclesiology for all periods. He writes more fully of the Church of Good Friday and of Easter Sunday, but

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² See some odd ideas on graduated suffering *MP*, 136.

²⁸³ I have heard an English and Welsh bishop seem to quote this directly.

²⁸⁴ The copy of this text from de Lubac does not include references so I do not know where he is drawing this from.

for the Church of Holy Saturday the conclusion is clear: Balthasar wants us to explore “being dead with the dead God”.²⁸⁵ A little more on some of Balthasar’s ideas will help us develop this.

Passive death

Tradition has that Christ makes a glorious descent into hell, but it is quite the opposite for Balthasar.²⁸⁶ He shares the dogmatic perspective that Jesus shared in everything of what it meant to be human, death included, however when the Creed states that he “descended into Hell” this must not, for Balthasar, be interpreted actively. Death for Balthasar involves the “abandonment of all spontaneous activity” and he offers us the following: “Jesus was really dead”, “in solidarity with the dead” and did not use Holy Saturday “for all manner of ‘activities’”.²⁸⁷ From this place death was then redeemed. He is not, if we make the ecclesial connections, allowing us to think that if the Church or a church dies, it will be an opportunity to emerge swiftly in some new form.

Risking talk of the absolute death of God, Rowan Williams tries to clarify Balthasar’s thoughts here:

This does not mean, as one kind of modern theology would have it, that Holy Saturday establishes that the transcendent God is dead, emptied out into the pathos of the crucified; quite the opposite. Transcendence, in the sense of radical liberty from the systems of the created world, is given definition by God’s enduring, as God, the depths of godlessness.

How do we make the link to the Church? Easily enough: that if the Church or a church walks, humbly, reluctantly, but lovingly the way of the cross, then, having endured a period of death, which is true death in its current visible form, but never transcendentally dead, it can rise again in grace. Balthasar is explicitly claiming that this must be a feature of the Church’s life if it is to be united to Christ.

²⁸⁵ *MP*, 181.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 148-149.

Kenotic and paschal ecclesiology

We might add to Balthasar with the reflections of a few others. Alan Lewis, also writing on the “much-ignored theme” of Holy Saturday chimes in on similar grounds to Balthasar, noting his debt to *Mysterium Paschale* though largely citing Protestant theologians.²⁸⁸ He, however, pushes the sociological points further; he nods to declining churches and goes on to explore what “such saving loss [might] ecclesially entail”. He steers clear, saying “it would be hideous”, of the idea that we might “glory in that phenomenon”, yet his overall theme explores whether “the ecclesial ... community of the Word is willing, like the Word of God itself, to be incarnate, crucified, and buried” so we should not be surprised about the language he uses.²⁸⁹ Following Donald MacKinnon he turns to *kenosis*, which we will touch on later in this chapter, and notes the paucity of “theology at what might be called an Easter Saturday ecclesiology”, yet ends on similar ground to Balthasar in his conception of a church dying and thereafter finding new life:

The present loss of prestige and power within the mainstream church in many Western nations, the voluntary or coerced “*kenosis* of establishment” in our present *chronos*, may represent a Spirit-given *kairos* for the church of Christ, his buried body in the world, to die anew to itself and – less accommodated and accommodating to the mores of the majority – be reborn to the task in the anonymous, incarnate present among the least of its brothers and sisters in the world.²⁹⁰

There are nuances of which we are right to be a little wary here though. As we saw earlier we would want to question “reborn” as quite antithetical to the resurrection which may come from the Church truly dying to itself. Similarly, eager almost for a “remnant church”, by referring to the present moment as a “Spirit-given *kairos*” Lewis perhaps has too little of the quality of lament in his writing, almost falling into the traps which rejoice in the death and diminishment of the Church. Nevertheless, as we will see with Rahner, it is helpful to find others who echo a paschal trajectory for the Church and gives some comfort in exploring this further.

²⁸⁸ Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: a Theology of Holy Saturday*, xi, 2.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 359.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 359-60.

Balthasar's context

To help us situate such thinking as relevant for our own period, we might conclude this section by wondering why Balthasar develops his thinking in these ways. An acknowledgement to the inspiration of Adrienne von Speyr must be given, especially as Balthasar himself was so keen to emphasise the centrality of her influence.²⁹¹ However, more importantly for our purposes, his life too, which led to a period of “wilderness years” after leaving the Jesuits, and him not being a contributor to Vatican II, also mark him out as a theologian of the period who seems to hold the form of the Church institution less reverentially, and therefore was perhaps more eager to press points about the death of the Church to their conclusion.²⁹² This is not to say that Balthasar had low regard for the Church, quite the opposite, just a certain rebelliousness against ways in which its life was being expressed. He was, as Nichols says, looking for a Barthian revolution in Christology and he writes as such.²⁹³ Oakes and Moss note this quotation:

My entire period of study in the Society of Jesus was a grim struggle with the dreariness of theology, with what men had made out of the glory of revelation. I could not endure this presentation of the Word of God and wanted to *lash out with the fury of a Samson: I felt like tearing down, with Samson's own strength, the whole temple* and burying myself beneath the rubble. But it was like this because, despite my sense of vocation, I wanted to carry out my own plans, and was living in a state of unbounded indignation.²⁹⁴

Is Balthasar referring here to just the way in which theology had been taught to him in the neo-scholastic manner, or in fact the whole Church project of which he was a part? One feels, if viewed through some of the lenses we have explored, and the style of his firm condemnation of those such as Rahner after Vatican II, that perhaps he was speaking of the latter.

We might easily wonder what he would make of the Church of today. As we have seen, Balthasar did not make the final connections to the pastoral life of the Church that we

²⁹¹ E. T. Oakes and D. Moss, *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5.

²⁹² Oakes and Moss, *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 6.

²⁹³ *MP*, 4-5.

²⁹⁴ Oakes and Moss, *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 3-4. Emphasis added

would want to establish for our own purposes. That was perhaps not really his style or approach. De Lubac muses that he rather neglected the possible contribution of the positive sciences in his work; Nichols, that he might even have seen such discussions about matters of “Church structure or tactics of pastoral practices” as a waste of Christian energies.²⁹⁵ For Balthasar, Christ’s life, contemplated upon, shines forth God’s love sufficiently enough to the world without overcomplicated frameworks and mediation.²⁹⁶ Most especially when reflecting on Holy Saturday he wants us to suspend judgement: “It is here most particularly that the exigence for system-building must be checked.”²⁹⁷ So, we would have been unlikely to find him making extended commentaries about the sociological reality of the Church of his day. One might even feel that he would find almost no merit in the planning and strategising attempts of the following chapter.

Nevertheless, the theological tools he has given us for our own topic are essential. He has led us into a world in which it is acceptable, moreover seems essential, to reflect on the death of the Church in Christ.

3. *On the Theology of Death*

Having seen from Balthasar how central the paschal mystery is to the Church’s mission, we turn once more to Karl Rahner to consider different ways in which individuals might approach, amongst other matters, death, their freedom, resurrection, baptism and dematerialisation. All these topics, if applied to the life of the Church have resonance, with appropriate caveats where we cannot extend Rahner’s thinking from the death of individuals to the death of corporate bodies too far. Rahner’s *On the Theology of Death* occupies the centre ground, supplemented with articles from *Theological Investigations* and elsewhere.

Writing in typically occasional style Rahner outlines his intention to develop a theological understanding of an “express doctrine of the Church” concerning death.²⁹⁸ In his introductory remarks he is, however, aware of the risk of arriving at conclusions which are “unclear, inchoate and problematic”, despite the doctrinal foundations upon which

²⁹⁵ *MP*, 5.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁹⁸ *On Death*, 8.

he is building.²⁹⁹ He places his discussion at times in a paschal vein, but less explicitly so than Balthasar; the metaphysical space he takes us into will be the expression of this. Furthermore, though he writes of the sacraments, he does not make an explicit link to the corporate death of the Church; doing this will be one of our primary tasks and represents one of the main exploratory moves in this study.

A first concern which we noted in the introduction to this chapter is to consider different types of death. Rahner opens a challenge of the topic, when highlighting how scriptural references to death have quite different contexts and meanings: there is, for example, the “death of the sinner, a death which is the expression and consequence of human guilt” but also “dying with Christ, when death no longer has the character of a penalty for sin”. There are therefore for Rahner statements about death which are “common to all” because of the “concrete condition of man” and those which are owing to “the relationship of the human being who dies to God”.³⁰⁰ Following Rahner’s structure, but extending his thought, there are for us three topics of particular interest, though we will only consider two in depth. Firstly, we will be interested in death which is “existentially neutral” to all individuals, which proceeds owing to the very nature of humans and, by the extension of our thinking, corporate bodies. Secondly, we will explore death which is interwoven with an act of salvation for a body of corporate individuals, if we can claim that such a salvific act exists in the corporate realm. As a third category of analysis, we shall touch on death’s nature as a “decisive event for sinful man” but only in passing.³⁰¹ Before we begin, however, given that Rahner’s writings are about individuals we will need consider if Rahner’s theology of death has relevance to the Church corporate at all.

The nature of the Church

To extend the theology of death which Rahner develops to the corporate life of the Church, a number of possible relationships will need to be developed, imperfect in places but yet still useful: firstly, that between individual “soul” and corporate “charism”; secondly between types of material body; and thirdly, discussing whether the Church, or just human beings as individuals, can be corporately saved.

²⁹⁹ *On Death*, 9.

³⁰⁰ *On Death*, 12.

³⁰¹ *On Death*, 12, 46.

We might also want to further examine whether it is proper to talk of the death of the Church. Balthasar has made this claim quite clearly, supported by Alan Lewis, but it may still bring pause for thought. Notably, the argument is quite easy to make for any particular church, at least in material terms; in Chapter One, for example, we also saw Metz talk of the charismatic art of dying for a religious order. The same could go for a parish, diocese or denomination. Extending this thinking to the death of the Church universal need not necessarily be done for our study, as we are thinking particularly within a geographical area and at the parish and diocesan level; exploring death within the scope of a particular expression of the body of the Church, complete, yet particular, could stand alone. However, there will still be merit in thinking of the whole Church of Christ and affirming a conception of it as “his apostolic, buried body in the world” in Lewis’ narrative, set alongside more “docetic seductions” which might focus on a model of the mystical body.³⁰² When we write of death below, therefore, we take in both a sense of the death of the Church and churches, explaining where necessary if there might be a particular nuance.

Body and Soul, Material Form and Charism

To begin, we might consider what Rahner considers death to be. He begins his discussion noting that “death is an event which strikes man in his totality” and that “[m]an is a union of nature and person.”³⁰³ He means by this, that death is not just something which affects our bodies, but our souls too. We must consider the extent to which the same could be said of a church or the Church. For this anthropological understanding, Rahner claims for humans that, as nature, there must be a “necessary mode of development” with “definite laws proper to it”, and as person an “exercise of his liberty” whereby “he disposes freely of himself”.³⁰⁴ He continues:

³⁰² Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: a Theology of Holy Saturday*, 346,48. Lewis argues “Yet just as there was no risen Jesus Christ who was not first, and remains forever (Heb. 5:6ff.) the Crucified and Buried One, so there is no glorious church, no triumphant chosen people, who are not by that very token those whose new, joyful life is hidden in suffering and death, and whose glory is the majestic humility of servitude and self-abandonment to others in conformity with Christ.”

³⁰³ *On Death*, 13. This emphasis on the “whole person” echoes *MP*, 148.

³⁰⁴ *On Death*, 13.

[i]n the doctrine of the Church, the natural aspect of death is expressed by saying that death is the separation of soul and body; its personal aspect by saying that it means the definitive end of our state of pilgrimage.³⁰⁵

If, instead of talking of Church we focus on one particular expression of church, it is not hard to make the necessary connections. The death of a form of the church certainly has a “personal” aspect when its pilgrimage ends. If charisms are spiritual gifts of the Spirit, given to particular individuals and expressions of the Church for a time, then the death of a church marks the end of a state of pilgrimage for a body of believers with a certain charism. Why this definitive end is important for Rahner we will see later. However, death might too have a “natural” aspect, when the material form of its expression comes to an end and its charism, ideas and values are detached from its bodily manifestation, to enter the realm of ideas, history, memory.

Might we go one step further however, and talk properly about the soul or charism of the Church? In common parlance, we talk freely of a soul of an organisation (or organism to suggest its living nature) and might do of the Church too. Yet, it would not be strictly true to say that an organisation has a soul in the way in which Rahner imagines soul. However, if we conceive the Church as the spiritual yet visible body of Christ then the connection is quite easy to make. If Jesus had a soul during his earthly life, once died, this soul was separated from material body, to take up a new relationship to the world, in fact, as we often conceive, in the form of a new material body, the Church.³⁰⁶

This seems quite abstract and to develop this, we will want to follow Rahner's thinking a little further and look at what happens at the moment of separation between soul and body. Rahner is keen, which is useful for our purposes, to separate the “organic being” of humans from their “personal essence” and consider death in two respects. We have seen how, in the case of the former, that death leads to the separation of body and soul,³⁰⁷

³⁰⁵ *On Death*, 13. David Albert Jones discusses how this is a departure from others: “Thus, the division of the human being into person and nature allows Rahner to consider an aspect of human death which he regards as having been overlooked in the traditional description of death as ‘the separation of body and soul.’” David Albert Jones, *Approaching the End: A Theological Exploration of Death and Dying*, Oxford scholarship online. Religion module, (Oxford: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 151.

³⁰⁶ Rahner does not make this connection to the Church, but if we follow his argument it seems the logical extension of the way in which he talks about what happens to the soul after death and the way in which we talk about the Church as the body of Christ.

³⁰⁷ *On Death*, 16.

whereby the “spiritual life principle of man, the soul” assumes “a new and different relation to what we usually call the body”. What this means for Rahner is established as follows: “The soul no longer holds the structure of the body together as a distinct reality, governed by its own immanent, vital laws and delimited from the rest of the universe.” In fact, following the event of the body’s dissolution, the soul somehow “maintains its personal, spiritual life”.³⁰⁸ If we can extend the idea of “spiritual life principle” to that of a body within the Church, we might again find here the stirrings of the idea of charism. But, as we have touched upon, we might also see the how the “spiritual life principle” of Christ also continues to animate the Church.

This is further clarified because after death there is still a relationship for Rahner between the soul and the material world. In fact, introducing talk of memory, history and ideas helps us perhaps see more clearly the way in which the soul continues to relate to the universe. Rahner sets up the way in which things are typically understood “The separation of soul and body is usually taken almost as a matter of course to imply that the spiritual soul becomes acosmic” (i.e, somehow no longer related to the universe, transcendent from it). Because, he says, under a “Neoplatonic mentality”, a dualism, we tend to think that “lack of relation to matter and nearness to God must increase in direct ratio.”³⁰⁹ However, though Rahner accepts that the “exact ontological determination” of all this is “extremely difficult” he nevertheless claims that instead the human soul, whilst losing its “determinate space-time location” and “within the mutual interrelations of individual beings”, still becomes a “co-determining factor of the universe precisely... as the ground of the personal life of other spiritual corporeal beings.”³¹⁰ For Rahner, therefore, souls, having detached from bodies in death, somehow enter into a much more essential relationship to the universe. In the flow of memories, ideas, technological, linguistic development, might the same apply for the charism and ‘soul’ of corporate bodies? That somehow, once released from particular corporate containers, they are more essentially related to their ground of the world, more ‘free’? Again, if the soul of Christ was detached from His material body on death, is not this new pancosmic relationship to the world found in the form of the Church?

³⁰⁸ *On Death*, 16-17, 32.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

To deepen this sense in which we might align soul and charism, consider lines such as: “the spiritual soul through its embodiment is in principle open to the world and is never a closed monad without windows, but is always in communication with the whole of the world”. Likewise, “the individual person, once rendered pancosmic through death, by this real ontological and open relation to the whole cosmos, might come to have a direct influence within the world.”³¹¹ Such lines, if read through the eyes of a church, or charism, have something touching the sense of the history of the Word, or the history of ideas. A church, or the Church as the body of Christ, re-enacting the paschal mystery in the Eucharist, in undergoing a death, somehow finds itself grounded in the reality of the universe in a much more fundamental and pancosmic way than when found in a particular temporal and material body.

We cannot press the thinking too far: Rahner’s work cannot be taken to mean that Church/corporate/communal charisms are the same as souls. The material Church is not doctrinally ensouled in the same way as humans, nor do the charisms of parts of the Church undergo the same purgatorial state upon death as he discusses for individual souls.³¹² We need not imagine either that at the end of the world, there will be the appearance of glorified communal bodies of every component part of the Church. However, there is much of resonance here when thinking about the Church, as the body of Christ, and how it will be glorified and its soul/charism brought to completion.

In his description of the resurrection and the glorified body this is made clearest. Death for Rahner, as we will see developed more later, is something to which we might positively strive as accomplishment:

³¹¹ Ibid., 22-23. On the “unity of material universe” and the “body as [the soul’s] essential form”: “does the soul in death strictly transcend this world or does it rather, by virtue of the fact that it is no longer bound to an individual bodily structure, enter into a much closer, more intimate relationship to that ground of the universe which is hard to conceive yet is very real, and in which all things in the world are interrelated and communicate anteriorly to any mutual influence upon each other” This would carry for ideas, memory, history?

³¹² *On Death*, 24. Though in fact you could argue charisms might undergo this “if it is assumed that the soul, freed from the body, is not removed entirely from the world, but that the soul, after surrendering its bodily structure and through that surrender, experiences in its morally free self-determination more clearly and acutely its own harmony or disharmony with the objectively right order of the world, and conversely, itself contributes to determining the latter.” Whether a charism can be given ontological status we have not properly considered, but could this not easily be seen as the way in which the legacy of a body of people is received or rejected by the world once the body in which it was carried has ceased to have definite material shape?

In this way the glorified body seems to become the perfect expression of the enduring relation of the glorified person to the cosmos as a whole.³¹³

Though Rahner is talking of individuals, might this be referring to the Church as the glorified body as the Body of Christ? This has begun our discussion and started to hint at how death may relate to the Church corporately. More though needs to be unpacked about Rahner's characterisation of death, to better understand how it relates to the Church and churches.

The end of pilgrimage and material bodies

Having looked at some of the aspects of natural death, we consider now some of the personal aspects to which Rahner refers. The connections between individual and corporate death are far easier to make here. Rahner refers to the moment of death as the point which brings humans "as a moral and spiritual person, a kind of finality and consummation".³¹⁴ He has in mind particular moments of freedom and fulfilment, which we will explore shortly, but also the end of this particular expression of life. Our earthly lives are "truly historical, that is, unique", with "a genuine beginning and a genuine end".³¹⁵ The critical separation to be made for Rahner is the difference between the life of individuals and "the incessant ebb and flow of the cycles of nature, which, in appearance at least, repeat themselves endlessly".³¹⁶ Marked in time, individuals, as the Church (as we saw in the last chapter), have a very definite history working their way to an "irrevocable end".³¹⁷ Perhaps the clearest possible connection is made between individuals and corporate bodies in the following: "The total, created reality of the world grows in and through incarnate spiritual persons and the world is, in a certain sense, the body of these persons. Their death slowly brings the universe to its own final stage."³¹⁸ Reading the Church for the world seems to make just as much sense, and gives some idea as to how the deaths of individual believers contribute to the corporate death of the bodies of which they are a part, the Church. That the world/Church is working its way towards some final end seems central for Rahner. We return to death as fulfilment in moment.

³¹³ Ibid., 26.

³¹⁴ *On Death*, 26.

³¹⁵ *On Death*, 26-27.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 27.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 27-8: "man is essentially a history".

³¹⁸ Ibid., 29.

The Universality of Death

Having made some fruitful connections, more challenging, however, is to connect Rahner's discussion about the "universality of death" to the corporate body, because it is not an "affirmation of faith" that such bodies will always die. They are subject to no such "law of death", in the way that would apply to individuals.³¹⁹ As Dunn argued, the Church's multigenerational existence is perhaps one of its challenges. Setting aside biological concerns, Rahner notes how "death belongs to the necessary features of human existence".³²⁰ This is not a connection we have the resources here to make to the Church. He explains things as follows for individuals:

Death and its necessity becomes more than an obscure unsolved, purely biological problem, because the universality of death in divine revelation is not ultimately based on a biological necessity, but on something proper to man as a spiritual person in his relationship to God. All men are sinners, therefore all men die.³²¹

Rahner is brief in exploring this, but we could not immediately make such claims for the Church or a church. However, if we accept his conclusion that sin subjects all to death, then it seems possible to reason that all non-glorified forms of the Church will be subject to sin and therefore to death in some manner, following the same fate as individual bodies, even if the timeframes over which this is extended is longer than for human beings.³²² Rahner does not elaborate on this further, but it is foundational for his theology of death and if it could be developed further could be considered foundational for our discussion of organisational life in the Church that though death "occurs through natural processes" it has an "ultimate, special cause" (our sinful separation from God).³²³

The nature of death

All these connections between Rahner's theology of death for the individual are interesting when reflecting on the death of an expression of church or the Church.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 14.

³²⁰ *On Death*, 15. See also *ibid.*, 14: "the universality of death in divine revelation is not ultimately based on a biological necessity, but on something proper to man as a spiritual person in his relationship to God."

³²¹ Ibid., 14.

³²² Ibid., 14-15, 33-34.

³²³ Ibid., 15.

However, the richest connection to make is one which sees death as end and fulfilment for humans in the same way for the Church.

Rahner continues his argument, as he is keen to explore “the intrinsic factor of death itself” and that “[i]n death something happens to him as a whole, something which, consequently, is of essential importance to his soul as well; his free, personal self-affirmation and self-realization is achieved in death definitively.”³²⁴ Rahner sees that the soul has an “innate tendency” which is fulfilled or opposed in this separation.

This is where we try to extend thinking into the realm of whether the Church or a church has as part of its end the intent to be corporately saved.³²⁵ It is a difficult movement to make completely, however from the way in which Rahner characterises the resurrection, it is worthwhile to attempt:

The resurrection of the body, at the end of the world, is a dogma of faith. Now...death, for reasons presently to be discussed, should not be conceived merely as something without purpose simply undergone by man, or as a destructive fate striking him from without, but is rather to be regarded as the accomplishment of the end towards man positively strives³²⁶

Turning away from Balthasar's notion of death as passivity, Rahner now makes his most substantial claims for the character of death.³²⁷ He writes: “death of its very nature is a personal self-fulfilment” which means it “cannot merely be an occurrence which is passively undergone...but it must also be understood as an act that a man interiorly performs”.³²⁸ This act appears positive for Rahner regardless of whether an individual (and therefore for our purposes a church) is aware of it. This does not mean death has no passive aspect to it. In fact, it is both “a maturing self-realization” but also “as the end of the biological life is...an irruption, a destruction”. However, it is activity and passivity at once. “If the substantial unity of man is taken really seriously [as spirit and matter], it is impossible to parcel out these two dimensions of human death”.³²⁹

³²⁴ Ibid., 18.

³²⁵ Ibid., 32.

³²⁶ Ibid., 25.

³²⁷ Ibid., 61.

³²⁸ Ibid., 30.

³²⁹ Ibid., 31.

Central for Rahner are two claims he makes: firstly, that this positive characteristic of death is part of the way in which we share in the same death as Christ, or that he took part in our humanity; secondly, that the ever-present mystery of death means we are never able to be sure of what happens in this final act. He makes the first claim, because of his assertion that death is somehow natural to all humans, and therefore to Christ if he lived our common life. For Rahner, death is a consequence of sin, but were we still in Eden we would still undergo a “death” without dying’ (*Rahner’s inverted commas*, notably a death “without suffering”), drawing out for him the way in which “not every aspect of our death can be considered a consequence of sin that ought not to have been”.³³⁰ For Rahner, if we are to die with Christ and take part in his redemptive death (and he was to truly share our deaths), there must be “some common element, neutral, so to speak” which means that when we die it is not possible to establish whether we die in Adam or die in Christ.³³¹ Can we imagine extending such thinking to the life of the Church or a church? Probably more easily, given that the death of a corporate body need not be so existentially laden.

Secondly, the “obscure, hidden character” nature of the actual death is critical and “it is never possible to say whether death is really the true perfection or the true end of the man who has died”.³³² It may be salvation or damnation. In death there is the opportunity for sin and separation from God, as well as a movement of accomplishment and grace. For Rahner, if death is somehow an active moment, it must be “understood as an act of fulfilment...achieved through the act of the whole of life in such a manner that death is axiologically present all through human life”. Whenever an individual “freely disposes of his whole person” they are “enacting [their] death” for Rahner.³³³ An individual, and perhaps therefore a communal body, can for Rahner commit a mortal sin in a “will to die autonomously”.³³⁴ Whether we can quite say that a church is ‘saved’ at its moment of death seems a step too far. However, we can certainly explore this idea that the Church or church in its free acts is making a choice, as accomplishment, for death, and in a choice for death is perhaps, though in obscurity, leaving open the possibility of moments of grace.

³³⁰ Ibid., 32.

³³¹ Ibid., 57. And: “if he really became like us in everything but sin, as the Epistle to the Hebrews says, then he became like us in death, too, and his death cannot be similar to ours merely in eternal.”

³³² Ibid., 41-42. For a mirror of this see: *MP*, 13.

³³³ Ibid., 43-44.

³³⁴ Ibid., 44.

Dying in Christ, whilst living

If we accept the proceeding argument that in death there is something of fulfilment then Rahner's final reflections express how death, transformed by Christ, potentially reached by the believer in a "state of grace", can also be "the culmination of our appropriation of his redemptive death". How might we imagine the death of the Church or a church as somehow partaking in this?³³⁵

As we have seen, what is most important to conclude for Rahner is that death is not just a moment at the end of life but in fact an act throughout our life. Rahner is keen to explore "factors belonging to death as such which render it absolutely different from any other possible event of human life and activity".³³⁶ Rahner claims, extending the idea that death is a positive act, that in fact any free act has the same quality. This takes us back to some of the discussions earlier about what happens to the soul:

We have already remarked that it is in death, and only in death, that man enters into an open, unrestricted relationship to the cosmos as a whole

We saw earlier something of Rahner's analysis of what happens when the soul is separated from the body, that it takes up a pancosmic relationship with the world. What Rahner therefore extends in the death of Christ is that after this event "his death is built into this unity of the cosmos, thus becoming a feature and intrinsic principle of it".³³⁷ Only in death do souls reach this new relationship. The same would go for the church or Church. Only in death, in a free act, does charism reach some essential relationship with the ground of the universe.

The paschal mystery and the call of the Church

Good Friday then is a clear reminder of our own deaths.³³⁸ Most explicitly Rahner says therefore, in preparation for the final act "We should practise, even in this life, how to die".³³⁹ We, Rahner states, and therefore for our purposes the Church by association, preach Christ's death "until all have died, in order that all may learn how to die, since all

³³⁵ Ibid., 56.

³³⁶ Ibid., 61.

³³⁷ Ibid., 65.

³³⁸ Ibid., 7,11, 140.

³³⁹ Ibid., 141.

are destined to die.”³⁴⁰ Adapting other Rahnerian language, death appears for all people as a moment of reaching the transcendental horizon.

There is no sense in which death is heroic for Rahner, quite the opposite, or reducible to simple concepts.³⁴¹ But why? Why need we face this “banality of death” this “gasping for breath and all the anguish from which no-one returns”.³⁴² Because, firmly stated by Rahner: “It is that it is not until we have reached this point, at which our lives and our experience have been reduced absolutely to nil that the true life begins for us.”³⁴³

The believer, and thereby the communal body, must dispose themselves in a particular way before death, however. “The trinity of faith, hope and charity makes death itself the highest act of believing, hoping, loving, the very death which seems to be absolute darkness, despair, coldness itself.”³⁴⁴ Rahner finds in death all that we are fearful of, which we try so hard to resist as individuals and corporate bodies, and yet finds it possibly redeemed: “in so far as these fundamental acts become constituents of death as an act of man, death itself is changed”.³⁴⁵ We might certainly imagine a church or the Church disposing itself in the same manner.

Sacramental life

Drawing all this together, a final connection will be helpful. Rahner concludes his reflections on death by looking at the nature of death in the sacraments, in particular in baptism, the Eucharist and the anointing of the sick. As we have seen, death is a movement of more generalised freedom from individuals and he writes:

The encounter between man and Christ, the pouring out of Christ’s salvation, life and glory upon man, does not take place only in the sacraments, but whenever and wherever man, in grace, freely accepts God’s grace. But this personal encounter between God and man in Christ can have an official, social, visible

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 141.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 7,11,142.

³⁴² Ibid., 142.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 71.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 72.

expression and embodiment in the Church, in the visible signs and rites established by Christ himself. These are the sacraments.³⁴⁶

The Church, living liturgically, is therefore constantly connected to the paschal mystery and Christ's death.³⁴⁷ Wary of Pelagianism, it is still however, only "in grace" that we may accept grace. Baptism is essential; in baptism we enter the "life in grace" whereby "the Christian dies through life into his death as a dying with Christ." The significance is even greater for Rahner: "We may even say that the life of grace *is* Christian death, if man's death is in fact the whole action of his life."³⁴⁸

However, this need not only be for individual believers. If some of the moves we have made earlier hold true, building too on Balthasar, then any particular expression of a church, lived in the light of the Church, and comprised of individual believers, is called to the same actions as Rahner counsels for 'man'. He therefore calls us to live deeply Eucharistically:

in this sacrifice and sacrament, not only is the mystery of the Cross brought near to us in spatio-temporal relation, but it actually produces its effects on our own lives...anyone who takes part in this mystery in divine worship...must also announce this death in his own life.³⁴⁹

'Anyone' holds for any body corporate too. Going further, we might even imagine anointing a 'sick' church, which poised on the brink of death, lies between salvation and damnation.³⁵⁰ At this moment, Rahner asserts, the individual most needs grace to "face it [death] properly" which, following the sacrament, leads either to the restoration of "bodily health" or the ability to endure "death like a Christian" and enter into the self-fulfilling processes which we have explored earlier. A sick church is faced with one of two paths – to its pilgrim end, or to some restoration. So, crucial for Rahner at the beginning, middle and end of the Christian life, we might see the resonance of such liturgical moments for corporate bodies too. We cannot, as we have outlined earlier, quite

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 73.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 74. And: "all the sacraments derive their strength and efficacy from Christ's redemptive death and thus all bring us into contact with his death"

³⁴⁸ *On Death*, 75.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 76.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 77-78.

extend the argument here to say that the Church or a church can itself be baptised, or receive a sacrament, but we can say that were individual believers living death freely then the character of the corporate body of believers would take on some of the freedom in relationship to institutional death which Rahner outlines for an individual. The Church is thereby sacrament. It is not at all improper to think therefore of the Church undergoing free deaths, where it makes a decision to accept God's grace, and being called to this as the nature of its mission.

4. Treading carefully around death

Our reflections on Rahner and Balthasar have opened up interesting avenues for a contemporary ecclesiological understanding of the paschal mystery, one which, we have argued is relatively underdeveloped. Such a claim seems to stand with the assessments of other commentators, though this chapter alone would want to be fully unpacked to more completely diagnose the extent of this lacuna. If we turned to the challenge of Chapter One, however, there is certainly nowhere that someone involved in contemporary pastoral practice could turn if they wanted to survey how the Eucharistic Church, the Church of Christ's crucified, buried and risen body, is called to live its mission in diminishment today by dying to itself anew.

However, before we conclude, there are two points around which we want to note possible pitfalls. The first, is that David Albert Jones appears uncomfortable that Rahner (and by extension Balthasar) is trying to characterise death as something positive, something he claims is relatively unusual and which he pins upon a relatively rare line of thinking since Ambrose. The critique in Jones' hands appears a little weak. He himself notes Rahner's hesitancy around speaking of death in a positive fashion and quotes sections in which Rahner is keen not to mischaracterise his project. For example, writing of martyrdom: "Man should not hurry towards a death which is the consummation of vacuity, a final emptying of life into meaninglessness, but towards a death which is the valid fulfilment of our existence."³⁵¹ Such a death can only be achieved in faith. For: "only by faith can this fall be interpreted as falling into the hands of the living God".³⁵² Rahner does not, it appears clear, dismiss the sensitivity and pain around death as an act which we most typically see in a negative light. His firm conviction that death is something

³⁵¹ *On Death*, 87.

³⁵² *Ibid.*

natural to us all, however, leads him to look for the positive. Nevertheless, we might still be a little nervous at the idea of “hurrying” to death and so perhaps this merits further investigation, especially with the more detailed critique below about the nature of *kenosis* and suffering.

The glory of suffering?

Tonstad is one who particularly critiques the kenoticists “who find the love of God in self-emptying” and through a *theologia crucis* produce a trinitarian theology which “refuses to find God elsewhere than on the cross”.³⁵³ Death is not overcome for these theologians but endlessly repeated in both history and as a central part of the trinitarian relationship. As we’ve seen earlier, she finds Balthasar’s use of the idea of a “super-death”, seemingly without reference to sin and the incarnation, as particularly shocking.³⁵⁴ Suffering, in this model, is seen as somehow essential.

These are big claims that would undermine the work we have done. Have we really been talking of the kenotic or suffering God who seems to rejoice in endless suffering? Have we in fact explored ecclesiological ideas which are no better than the ones we were wary of in Dunn when he spoke of putting the Church to death?

Balthasar, it is true, does bake suffering into the Trinitarian life. He writes: “what in the temporal economy, appears as the (most real) suffering of the Cross is only the manifestation of the (Trinitarian) Eucharist of the Son.”³⁵⁵ If the Church undergoes suffering, paschally so, because both Rahner and Balthasar admit suffering in death within our sinful world, then Balthasar’s suggestion here could quite easily see this suffering as eternal. However, Balthasar at the end of *Mysterium Paschale* also claims that the Church cannot occupy a determinate place in the paschal mystery and so seems to leave open that the cross and suffering are not only model for the Church’s existence.³⁵⁶ He writes of the Church and Christians: “Their place is neither in front of the Cross nor behind it, but on both its sides: without ever settling for the one vantage point or the other they look from now one, now the other, as ceaselessly directed.” The Lord, is for

³⁵³ Tonstad, *God and Difference: the Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude*, 19, 46.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.* ix.

³⁵⁶ *MP*, 266.

Balthasar “the Unique One” who “is the identity of Cross and Resurrection” into whom “Christian and ecclesial existence is disappropriated”.³⁵⁷

This is not, it must be admitted, an easy tightrope to walk. Perhaps Rahner’s perspective is helpful here, in the way in which death for him is also a free act which we can live daily in grace, not solely wedded to suffering. Nevertheless, Balthasar’s conception of the Christian life as journey, cross and resurrected body, with scars, does seem to characterise our earthly existences; we need not glory in suffering but yet see it as somewhat unavoidable for a life fully lived. Given that it represents, to some extent, willed suffering, how we approach martyrdom is perhaps a key question here. Jones argues that martyrdom represents for Rahner an ultimate act of freedom in death, as it could have been avoided. In seeking to imitate the death of Christ martyrdom is not, however, the same as suicide, which is seen by Rahner, Jones claims, only as an escape.³⁵⁸ The final consequences of martyrdom are severe therefore, but not reckless. Nevertheless, the charge of those such as Tonstad and others is so stark, that further work would need to be done to see explore possible challenges.³⁵⁹

5. Talking properly about change

Noting areas for further work, before we conclude this chapter, a final word on what these ideas might mean for how we talk about change in the Church is useful. What we note from such a discussion above is that talk of death seems to significantly heighten the register in which we talk about processes of change in the Church. Often reform language, for example, somehow does not go deep enough, at least for me, in really conveying the way in which we are asked to approach our ecclesial mission. Nor ideas of reshaping and refashioning. They can maybe make the grade in certain settings, but alone do not capture the essence of imagining change in the Church which is characteristic of its real mission. Renewal is more apt, as is transformation but so too might be language which talks of crucifixion or resurrection. Equally, we need not shy away from language about death as much as we will see to be the case.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ Jones, *Approaching the End: A Theological Exploration of Death and Dying*, 163-64,65.

³⁵⁹ And this is before we get into some of the moves Balthasar makes around the Church, sex and gender.

This is essential, because death does not mean the end, for individuals or the Church. In fact, the cross and resurrection inaugurate “a new age” of human history Rowan Williams writes, surely with a twinkle in his eye in reference to contemporary modern spirituality.³⁶⁰ For Williams, in tune with Balthasar, the paschal event is quite disruptive and shocking. There is certainly an interruption and discontinuity. However, there is also new life and hope; human history is constantly changing, through such loss, but also with hope in God’s movement.³⁶¹ Echoing our core discussion, for Williams, in these moments of change and what is often termed “reform” the Church has the opportunity to both return to its history but also to relive its paschal journey. Heightening the language as we would desire, reform, for Williams, represents moments at which the Church has a chance to comprehend and rewrite its story and narrative quite comprehensively, explaining how that which has gone before relates to now and the future, and also how we might understand loss and growth.³⁶² The nature of this must be paschal, whether we might lean to a more Rahnerian conception of death as free response to grace, or Balthasar’s more dramatised language where the way between the old and the new cannot be any “immanent evolution” (more language that the cross keeps us from).³⁶³ The diocesan plans we will read are a mixture of historical, theological, sociological and pastoral reflection; given our discussion here, it will therefore be interested to note in the next chapter the register in which they speak about change.

6. Conclusion

The events of those paschal days are absolutely central to the individual Christian vocation, as well as the birth, life and mission of the Church. Furthermore, following the analysis of this chapter, we are more able to see clearly how they may be essential for the inevitable and necessary deaths (final and ongoing) of the corporate Christian body of the Church. There may perhaps be no other deaths quite like Christ’s, but we are nevertheless called to participate in his as fully as we are able, and so, in baptismal and Eucharistic devotion, might be the Church. This sense has flowed from developing Balthasar and Rahner’s existing thinking and whilst it falls short of conclusive proof about the importance of such ideas to the Church, it has shown the merit of the questions

³⁶⁰ Rowan Williams, *God with us: the meaning of the cross and resurrection - then and now* (London: S.P.C.K., 2017). 63.

³⁶¹ Rowan Williams, *Why study the past?: the quest for the historical church*, Sarum Theological Lectures (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005), 89-90.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 9-13.

³⁶³ *MP*, 56.

being asked in this study. As Rahner states: "Wherever there is real liberty, there is love for death and courage for death".³⁶⁴ These are not easy words, but Rahner, in some of his positive characterisation of death, at least gives us a window to accept them. Nor need one accept all the extensions of Balthasar's thinking to embrace this central idea. Clearly it is not novel to refer to the Church as a Eucharistic body. However, it is more unusual, as we saw in Chapter One to suggest that the Church should live Eucharistically itself, holding this identity as living sacrifice by entering into, in its corporate processes, movements which lead to death, in the expectation and hope of resurrection.

Our analysis of Rahner's approach to change in the previous chapter laid the groundwork for some of these conclusions in the way in which he characterised the radical new life which can result from proper processes of change. However, they were not rooted around the cross and only after a more focused study of death and resurrection are we able to bring our paschal thoughts into view. Nevertheless, to bring the two chapters together, Rahner's discussions about experimentation in the previous chapter could take us to a similar place if we transpose and stretch some thinking from Rowan Williams' *Lost Icons*.³⁶⁵ If the cross is both an historical reality but also an icon, language around which is formed somewhat experimentally, then, somewhat strangely, the cross has something of the nature of play and experimentation about it. True experimentation, freely entered into, is something like approaching the death of which Rahner talks.³⁶⁶ Living the way of the cross, our deaths in Christ therefore also have something of an experimental quality whereby we make choices, sometimes irresponsibly Williams might add, in the hope of moving forwards in grace. It would be important not to take this too far, but in death, in freedom, we leave ourselves open to the most radical grace and stretching, through disruption, of our way of living the Church.

For contemporary ecclesiological reflections, while neither Balthasar nor Rahner make clear bridges from their theological writings to the contemporary sociological reality of the Church, both lay the groundwork for a more extensive paschal ecclesiology. What is

³⁶⁴ *On Death*, 87.

³⁶⁵ Rowan William, *Lost Icons* (London: Morehouse, 2002), 11-16.

³⁶⁶ I am only signalling towards an idea here and it would need to be explored in more depth. However, as a caveat, this is not to say that the cross is actually a playful game, or folly, far from it. An 'experiment' in Rahner's conception is within the Church only 'run once' and has the utmost seriousness about it. The lightness with which we often use the language of experimentation makes it a somewhat confusing term for Rahner (or the translators) to have used, as we have noted. Play, I think Williams would also argue, is itself very serious too.

clear most of all, however, mirroring Rahner's generalised ecclesiology of the last chapter, is that these conclusions could have binding importance for the Church (and individuals, or other organisations which are component parts of the Church) whatever the nature of the sociological reality. If an individual is young or old, firm or infirm, they are called to die, daily, in Christ. If a Christian charity is in its first years, or many years established, it is called to die, daily, in Christ. And finally, a religious order, a parish church, the Church globally, whether in a particular period of sociological health or diminishment, is called to the same. It is quite appropriate therefore to enter liturgically into these moments, whilst accepting the limitations that the corporate bodies of the Church do not have souls in quite the same way as individuals.

We concluded our literature review in Chapter One wondering, following the calls of some key commentators, about a "theology of extinction" (or diminishment, collapse, decline). With an essential aim to explore new life within the Church, we arrive here, however, not only with a fuller understanding of how the Church might, *post hoc*, understand part of itself becoming extinct, diminishing or collapsing but also with an understanding of how the Church might approach any particular moment of its life with a call to explore its death.

Such a paschal ecclesiological outlook is comprehensive, but requires enriching to live it out. Lest we become myopic, Healy and Schindler note when writing about Balthasar: "There is... no aspect or detail of Christ's historical life that does not represent an infinite source of life for the ongoing mission of the Spirit and the Church."³⁶⁷ That the paschal mystery has primary significance for us in developing an ecclesiology does not mean that our way of proceeding is just about the cross and resurrection, or any other aspect of Christ's life. It is about His whole life, summed up by the Eucharistic act of giving, with a special importance placed on the paschal process. Balthasar, whilst keen not to "reduce this hard Cross to the gentler 'cross of light'³⁶⁸ points to a richer Christian ethic which acknowledges that Christ was "for thirty years a manual worker, and a spiritual worker for only three years, before the three days of his Passion, death and Resurrection."³⁶⁹

³⁶⁷ Healy and Schindler, eds., *For the life of the world: Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Church as Eucharist*, 58.

³⁶⁸ *MP*, 264.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 265.

Furthermore, we counselled that this focus on paschal matters needs to steer a difficult course between theologies which may appear to glorify in suffering, or seek to hasten the death of the Church in a way which is not truly related to the free act of humans or God. Caution needs to continue to be exercised if these thoughts are to be developed into lived pastoral practice. Nevertheless, we hope these reflections have gone some way to closing a gap which we suggested might be apparent in our ecclesiological understandings.

How therefore is this relevant to the life of the Church today? Perhaps can some of the Churches' current challenges be seen as symptoms of too little of this dying on the way 'up'? Might now some of the opportunities for mission, renewal and restructuring for the Church be found in acts of communal dying? We cannot answer the former here but, if we follow Balthasar and Rahner, set alongside others we have come across, we can give a definitive yes to the later. In our final substantial chapter, we will therefore move into quite a different register and turn to the contemporary restructuring plans of English and Welsh Catholic dioceses. In tune with the primary questions of this thesis, we will examine the extent to which there is any recognition of the theological importance of the paschal mystery in these approaches. If there is, this chapter helps us conclude that these ideas are to their merit. If there is not, then it will be interesting to see which other ideas dominate.

Following a review of contemporary diocesan restructuring materials, we will conclude our study with some reflections as to approaches the Church might take in light of these findings, whether there is a way to more deeply live the death of the Church rather than just be subjected to it. As Rahner comments on doctrine. "As the explicit understanding of divine revelation develops, the Church, in announcing and teaching it, emphasizes now one and now another portion of it, not according to the requirements of system, but according to the concrete necessities of the historical situation."³⁷⁰ Now might be such a time for a different emphasis.

³⁷⁰ *On Death*, 11.

Chapter 4: Reviewing English and Welsh diocesan pastoral planning 2005-2019

Having explored theological ideas for this moment of the Church and argued for the merits of taking seriously a paschal ecclesiology, we might now ask our final question: is the significance of a paschal ecclesiology appropriately appreciated in contemporary British Catholic reform and renewal efforts? There is, by necessity, a substantial change in tone and style here, though we have reserved more extensive notes on methodology and scope to an Appendix.

In summary, there are twenty-two Catholic Dioceses in England and Wales. A sample of their published materials found documentation for seventeen of the dioceses.³⁷¹ When analysed, the material was supplemented with occasional news articles and website content, predominantly written and in a handful of cases audio-visual. The analysis concentrates on twelve dioceses found upon first sampling, but the conclusions hold for the whole sample. For further information, especially with regard to how the materials differ in scope and the way in which they were produced, see the Appendix.

We will begin framing the material and dioceses' own sense of the changes they are grappling with. We will then go on to explore their general tone and response, the implicit and explicit theological ideas present, and whether they chime with the theological frameworks we have seen from Rahner and Balthasar. We will then explore the concept of change management in a little more depth before concluding. We are not aware of any other studies of this type of material, in England and Wales, or elsewhere, and note that, pivotal as they are to the life of the contemporary Church, much further study would be beneficial.

³⁷¹ The dioceses sampled and the headline titles of their renewal and reform programmes are: Arundel and Brighton: *Vision for Mission*; Birmingham: *Future Planning*; Brentwood: *Working Together to Evangelise our Diocese*; Clifton: *A Future Full of Hope*; East Anglia: *Alive in Faith*; Hexham and Newcastle: *Forwards Together in Hope*; Lancaster: *Fit for Mission*; Liverpool: *Synod 2020*; Middlesbrough: No specific named programme; Northampton: *Together in Faith and Walking Humbly With Our God*; Plymouth: *Go Make Disciples*; Portsmouth: *Bringing People to Jesus Through His Church*; Salford: *Preparing the Way and Hope in the Future*; Shrewsbury: *Our Mission Together*; Southwark: *Towards a Vision*; Westminster: *Graced by the Spirit - Planning our Future Together*; Wrexham: *Into the Future*. Fuller references are given in the bibliography.

1. Context for diocesan responses

All the documents considered are responding to a similar moment in the life of the Church. What has brought this moment into being and what are seen as the root causes of the new contextual landscape? Some narrative framing will be instructive to begin with.

There are both internal and external issues to the life of the Church to mention. In terms of the new societal context that the Church now faces, not all dioceses refer to the situation in quite the same terms. Brentwood notes “the needs of a quickly changing world”,³⁷² Arundel and Brighton talk of a “world that is in great in need”³⁷³ and along with Clifton talks about being in a time of the “New Evangelisation”.³⁷⁴ This more subtly refers to issues that other dioceses choose to address directly: Salford talks of a culture of “materialism”³⁷⁵, Lancaster of “aggressive secularism” and “hedonism”³⁷⁶, Northampton “the rise of secularism”.³⁷⁷ Hexham and Newcastle lends a local perspective: “We are called to be disciples in a very specific part of the world – a part of the world which has seen enormous changes in recent years. The total eradication of the mining industry and shipyards has left scars in the lives of many families.”³⁷⁸ Most of these issues will be familiar from the secondary, sociological literature. Rahner saw these changes for the Church as a consequence of it being inserted into “a total pattern of historically operative forces”.

Turning to internal reasons for why dioceses believe they are facing a changed context. Wrexham mentions that in the middle of the twentieth century the “bishops of the time saw a great renaissance of the Catholic Church and developed a philosophy of expansion and growth”.³⁷⁹ Such growth was unnecessary when congregations started declining after

³⁷² *Working Together to Evangelise our Diocese*, Diocese of Brentwood, Summer 2017.

³⁷³ *The Word who is Life: Vision for Mission. Resources for Reflection*, Presentation, Diocese of Arundel and Brighton, 2017.

³⁷⁴ *A Future Full of Hope*, Clifton Diocese, 2017.

³⁷⁵ *Preparing the Way: Consultation Report*, Diocese of Salford, November 2015.

³⁷⁶ Patrick O'Donoghue, *Fit for Mission*, Diocese of Lancaster, 2007.

³⁷⁷ Peter Doyle, *Walking Humbly With Our God – Journeying On Together: Presentation at the Diocesan Gathering*, Thornton College, Saturday 10 March 2012.

³⁷⁸ *Forward Together In Hope - Preparing the Way*, Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, March 2015.

³⁷⁹ Peter Brignall, *Into the Future - 1*, Diocese of Wrexham, 2015.

the 1960s. Portsmouth looks to ascribe some of their challenges to low rates of practice amongst Catholics, just 13% of the baptised attending church it is said.³⁸⁰

Salford places the emphasis differently:

We need to be careful to recognise that this is not an indication that the Church is falling apart and declining: the Church consists of the whole people of God. We benefitted for over fifty years from a very large and generous influx of priests from Ireland. Those priests are now either approaching retirement or have already retired.³⁸¹

Salford positively affirms: “We are returning to the situation that existed in an earlier period of the history of this Diocese.”³⁸² Birmingham at one point historically generalises and relativises the challenges facing the diocese: “[Every generation] need[s] to look carefully at our customs and practices to discern whether they are truly serving the Church’s mission in a way that is faithful to the Gospel and that meets contemporary needs.”³⁸³ As with external issues, there is a range of opinions and there is very little novel offered to our understanding here.

These analyses are interesting to note for framing purposes, but it is not our intention here to assess the veracity of causal attribution claims. The reasons why the Church is facing a changed context, internal or external, are left to others to discuss; debates about these issues will likely continue to rage. What is less important to this study is why the Church finds itself where it is today, and more how it chooses to respond, using which theological ideas for guidance.

However, the context is not entirely immaterial, particularly in what it suggests about the scale of the response needed. Substantial changes in context will perhaps require a substantial response and our initial interest is in showing that dioceses believe themselves to be dealing with a situation that warrants asking existential questions about their

³⁸⁰ Philip Egan, *Bringing People to Jesus Through his Church*, Pastoral Letter From the Bishop, Diocese of Portsmouth, 24 September 2017.

³⁸¹ Salford, *Preparing the Way: Consultation Report*.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Bernard Longley, *Pastoral Letter of the Archbishop of Birmingham for the Fifth Sunday of Lent, 24-25 March 2012*, Archdiocese of Birmingham.

ultimate mission, not just technical questions about how to reorganise themselves so as to continue their activities as usual.

Therefore, to conclude our contextual setting with a summary of the scale of the challenges faced: how arresting is the situation in which dioceses find themselves? Moving beyond explaining their new context and finding causal patterns, nearly every diocese then raises the following issues in relation to the Church's position today, issues that show the changes required to be more 'existential' than 'course correction'. Some outline statistics are most helpful:

- **Ageing and declining numbers of priests.** The decline in the number of priests that dioceses are facing is precipitous, even accounting for priests retiring from full-time ministry long after the recommended age of 75. Dioceses do their analyses differently, but most seem to need to respond to having 50% fewer priests in full-time ministry within the next decade. A decline in the number of vocations to the priesthood in recent decades is at least in part the cause of this.
 - o *Arundel and Brighton*: for 85 Parishes and 128 churches today, will have 50 priests by 2030, down from 90 today, of whom 25 will be under the age of 65.³⁸⁴
 - o *Salford*: estimates having 108 priests below retirement age for its current 150 parishes in 2020.³⁸⁵
 - o *Wrexham*: for 40 parishes and 65 churches today, will have 10 diocesan priests below retirement age in 2020; religious congregations in decline are argued to compound the issue further.³⁸⁶
- **Fewer congregants.** All dioceses have seen attendance at mass falling in recent years.
 - o *Plymouth* talks of the numbers attending church halving in the past thirty years, meaning that less than 1% of the total population of the area now attends church.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁴ Arundel and Brighton, *The Word who is Life: Vision for Mission. Resources for Reflection*.

³⁸⁵ Salford, *Preparing the Way: Consultation Report*.

³⁸⁶ Brignall, *Into the Future - 1*.

³⁸⁷ Mark O'Toole, *Go...Make Disciples. A Pastoral Message from Bishop Mark O'Toole*, Diocese of Plymouth, May 2017.

- *Hexham and Newcastle* charts mass attendance as having fallen 63% between 1981 and 2013.³⁸⁸

It is notable that Portsmouth and Clifton Diocese – in documents that differ in tone – do not make any reference at all to statistical matters. However, they still make brief reference to congregations being in numerical decline and having fewer priests, so the backdrop to the material is not dissimilar, just the chosen emphasis.

Worth noting too momentarily is that not all changes are responses to decline. Birmingham talks of increasing pastoral provision required in Bicester and Banbury where populations have grown.³⁸⁹ Wrexham looks to respond to the opening of a new prison by moving a priest into a chaplaincy role.³⁹⁰ Such cases of reorganising pastoral provision as a response to greater need, rather than because of decreasing resources, seem rare, however. The overall context that all dioceses are facing involves what can be referred to as 'material' or 'institutional' decline, leading to the 'death' of individual churches. Their plans and theological reflections are born in this situation.

Before moving on, important caveats must be given around the above figures. It should not be seen that dioceses appear obsessed by their statistics. The Bishop of Plymouth lays out the scope of the argument well: "I recognise that we have to be careful 'playing the numbers game'. Of course, many more Catholics come to our churches intermittently or at key moments of their life. Often, we are ministering and supporting many more people than the official statistics indicate." He says: "Our desire to share our faith - to evangelise - is driven then, not primarily by numbers."³⁹¹

Aware that statistics do not tell the whole story, some balancing of the missional purpose of the diocese with the material reality of the Church is true across all the dioceses. However, there is an overriding sense of the material reality of the picture unfolding. In a relatively positive and missionally-focussed pastoral letter, the Bishop of Plymouth still

³⁸⁸ Hexham and Newcastle, *Diocesan Facts and Figures*.

³⁸⁹ Bernard Longley, "A Summary of Future Planning Activities Across the Archdiocese in 2015." *Catholic Today*, Archdiocese of Birmingham, February 2016.

³⁹⁰ Peter Brignall, *Into the Future - 2*, Diocese of Wrexham, 2016.

³⁹¹ O'Toole, *Go...Make Disciples*.

cannot escape his comment that: "I have become increasingly conscious of the challenge that lies before us as a Diocese."³⁹²

To conclude the above: the contexts these dioceses are facing are all broadly the same in terms of the impacts they are having on diocesan ways of working. All have the character of diminishment and decline in material terms, regardless of chosen emphasis and causal justification. We can turn now to some of the ways in which they are reacting to these changes, beginning with affective responses, which in fact dominate over explicitly theological explorations.

2. Affective responses

Dioceses have varying responses to the severity of the challenges facing them, the best way in which to respond and the timeframes within which change needs to occur. Notably too, varying affective responses can be seen across the documents.

Responses can be categorised in three ways. 1) Responses found in documents that broadly seek to focus on the mission of the church, not giving much consideration to the 'problems' or 'challenges', have an affective tone which can usually be characterised as 'positive'. 2) Those that are very concentrated on the challenges faced by a diocese have a tone which is usually 'negative'. 3) Those that sit between these two approaches, 'balanced'. Most dioceses sit within this third category.

It should be noted that these documents are only a sample of all possible information. A particular affective response apparent in the documents cannot be taken to be binding judgement about the affective response present across a diocese. All responses have their strengths and potential weaknesses and we will look at their theological approaches at a later stage. Those dioceses that are positive and inspiring could be criticised for not addressing challenges directly enough. Those that seem negative and are too focused on challenges may not be stressing enough the hope that is inherent in the Christian life.

The below will not seek to explain why a particular affective response is present. There could be a wide variety of reasons (the scale of the challenges facing a diocese, perhaps

³⁹² Ibid.

based on how long issues have been left unaddressed, the general demeanour of the bishop etc.). However, some initial analysis will be helpful, as it also helps draw out to what extent paschal imagery is operating.

The first, positive, type of response is found in all documents to some extent, as most dioceses lead with an attempt to inspire some missionary zeal. The Bishop of Portsmouth is one of the most positive in his messaging, with a focus on inspiring mission, evangelism, working with young people and promoting vocations, particularly to the priesthood. He says:

Portsmouth people need to be holy people. We need to repent of our sins, to seek communion and to respect legitimate diversity. Catholicism is always a big ship with something for everyone, a 'big-tent Church', big enough for all to find a role. We need to imitate Jesus, love one another and, filled with the Spirit, to foster a joyful, positive, 'can-do' attitude.³⁹³

Summarising his vision, he says: "So this is my vision. It is broad and open-ended, a vision that acknowledges all the great work being done already".³⁹⁴

It is not clear from this document how the bishop is intending to deal with issues that other dioceses seem to feel so acutely around the shortage of priests and relative overabundance of parishes. He says:

People rightly say we are short of priests. We are! But there is also a grave shortage of people, of laity truly converted to Christ, of laity who love the Church, of laity who are willing to take responsibility, who want the Church to work, who will give their time and will help her be what she is meant to be. We need many more 'can-do' Catholics.³⁹⁵

The general tone, however, remains buoyant.³⁹⁶

³⁹³ Egan, *Bringing People to Jesus Through his Church, Pastoral Letter From the Bishop*.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 4.

³⁹⁶ It is worth noting here that the material for East Anglia and Shrewsbury has a very different in tone and style to most other dioceses, focusing predominantly on fundraising for mission and not at all on

Plymouth is not dissimilar in tone, talking of challenges ahead but also the great fidelity and dedication of all in the diocese. A Bishop's Pastoral Letter affirms: "Let us not listen to those 'prophets of doom' who all too readily speak of the demise of the Catholic faith altogether." The tone of the material is consultative, exploratory, aiming to be inspirational. Structured around the following themes: Prayer, Vision, an Evangelising Team, the Eucharist, Loving Service, Rigorous Adult Formation, Small Groups, and Missionary Zeal, it is set alongside Jesus' command to "Go... make disciples" (Matthew 28:19).³⁹⁷

From an upbeat and hopeful tone in Portsmouth and Plymouth, which broadly pass over any idea of "hard choices" or "difficult decisions", Arundel and Brighton strikes what I am calling a 'balanced' tone: "We do have the gifts and talents for this task, but the demands are great and we need to re-structure in order to fulfil the work we have been given."³⁹⁸ The Director of Development in Brentwood writes similarly and addresses this issue of tone directly: "I am not here to facilitate a process of mediocrity or to make the best of a difficult situation. I am appointed to facilitate a positive process that leads to positive outcomes."³⁹⁹ Brentwood also seems relatively relaxed about the pace of the journey: "We have enough time to move gently towards our new human response to God's love for us but we must move with purpose."⁴⁰⁰

Birmingham is another case study for this attitude: "We have sought to be positive in moving forward, and planning for the future, in a way that acknowledges change as a necessity and not always as something regrettable. It is true to say that we have no option but to adapt to change, but the way in which we adapt must be positive."⁴⁰¹ Birmingham's documents refer on more than one occasion to "The Art of the Possible: One of the most difficult parts of a changing mission is that priests and deacons and the Faithful can sometimes be held back by thinking about what is not possible rather than addressing

restructuring. The theological reasons for this are not explored here, nor in the documentation examined. Portsmouth and Westminster also have fundraising campaigns, but set alongside pastoral reorganising.

³⁹⁷ O'Toole, *Go...Make Disciples*.

³⁹⁸ Arundel and Brighton, *The Word who is Life: Vision for Mission. Resources for Reflection*.

³⁹⁹ Steve Webb, *A Vision for our Diocese of Brentwood 2019. Working Together to Evangelise our Diocese*. Address, 2017.

⁴⁰⁰ Brentwood, *Working Together to Evangelise our Diocese*.

⁴⁰¹ Bernard Longley, *Coventry Deanery Letter to Parishioners*, Archdiocese of Birmingham, 11/12 January 2014.

with confidence what might be possible.”⁴⁰² The following therefore characterises the general approach to such a balanced tone:

In so many ways, and sometimes with sadness, many priests, deacons, religious and lay people have been courageous and generous in addressing change or in becoming more active in their parish as a result of greater knowledge of the need for change and their part in it.⁴⁰³

Change is pressing, challenging to deal with, but is certainly not prompting despair.

As a brief aside, it is interesting to note here that Birmingham Archdiocese began its current (as of 2019) process of change in 2012. Archbishop Longley has updated the archdiocese at the start of every year with a progress report and, of the material being analysed, the documentation for Birmingham covers the most extended period of time. Their process of change has clearly happened in waves: “For those who have experienced change in their parish life in that time, it is helpful to see that it is a much wider reflection on the life of our extensive Diocese. For those who have not yet experienced such change, it is important to see that what can often begin as a difficult and sometimes painful period of transition can lead to new models of Catholic life.”⁴⁰⁴ There is a sense that a steady pace of change offers up a fairly balanced emotional response. However, if one wants to place the matter starkly again, there is little sense in the documents that these efforts to change diocesan practices are leading to the hoped for ‘green shoots’. Though perhaps less emotionally dramatic, a slow decline is still a decline.

Returning to our types of affective response, at the other end of the emotional spectrum, there is a blunter approach to prognosis. There is no starker summary of the situation of a diocese than the Bishop of Wrexham’s Pastoral Letter of September 2015. There is a sense that necessary changes have been left far too long. In concluding the bishop writes: “The model of the church we have inherited is, in business terms, no longer fit for

⁴⁰² *Shared Parishes Day - Handout*, Archdiocese of Birmingham, Undated.

⁴⁰³ Bernard Longley, *Communion and Mission: Present and Future. Progress Report*, Archdiocese of Birmingham, 2013.

⁴⁰⁴ Bernard Longley, "Changing Patterns of Parish Life," *Catholic Today*, Archdiocese of Birmingham, February 2017.

purpose and failing now in her mission.”⁴⁰⁵ Six months later, in a follow-up letter, he states: “The Mass attendance figures for 2015 show a decrease of some 300 to just over 6,000 from that of 2014; if that trend continues there will be little option but to restructure again.” The Bishop notes of the situation after the intended reorganisation: “For this we have no recent experience upon which to draw and therefore considerable goodwill and patience will be required from people and clergy alike.”⁴⁰⁶ There is a sense of moving into a setting of which nobody has any experience.

It seems too that this is a situation that cannot be avoided. Needing to close churches is an inevitability and the bishop is keen to see off potential opposition from people who might argue that a different picture might emerge: “Other imponderables such as migration rates, new housing developments, visitor numbers, etc. cannot be accounted for as factors that can dramatically change the size and character of local communities.”⁴⁰⁷ What is more telling of the documentation is the almost palpable lack of hope that comes forth. More than in any other diocese, the matter at hand is seen almost as a ‘management problem’, reluctantly implemented. The language is often passive and detached: matters will “need to be dealt with”, parishes will have “to be closed” and there “needs to be some realignment”.⁴⁰⁸ The situation even seems almost an historical ‘mistake’ at times: “Historically and for a variety of reasons, some good some not so good, the Church in this Diocese has a disproportionately large number of churches for the number of Christ’s faithful.”⁴⁰⁹

The missional approach of other dioceses is not replicated here. “Parishes and communities are to be and *will of course be* encouraged to be evangelising communities”.⁴¹⁰ Such lines come almost as an afterthought. When, having laid out an apparently stark situation about the number of parish priests available, and having discussed previous church closures, the bishop seems to note with a heavy heart: “but expectations ride as high now as ever before to have a convenient church nearby.”⁴¹¹ There is almost disappointment in the intransigent nature of the situation. Parishes “MUST” reduce to

⁴⁰⁵ Brignall, *Into the Future - 1*.

⁴⁰⁶ Peter Brignall, *Into the Future - 2*, Diocese of Wrexham, 2016.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Brignall, *Into the Future - 1*.

⁴¹⁰ Brignall, *Into the Future - 2*. Emphasis added.

⁴¹¹ Brignall, *Into the Future - 1*.

one Mass if they can it is said, yet “Bishop Edwin [the previous bishop] asked for this twice during his time as Ordinary.”⁴¹² Interestingly for our purposes, death of parts of diocesan life, in the form of closure, is certainly apparent in such a presentation.

Overall, none is starker than the presentation of the Bishop of Wrexham. The heaviness of the challenge is written into every paragraph: “it becomes increasingly difficult to justify the expense of those buildings the doors of which are open for little more than two hours out of every 168; in any other model they would be described as redundant and a luxury” and “many parishioners don’t want any weekday activities regardless of what they are”.⁴¹³ After certain changes parishioners “may have to adapt their Sunday or Saturday regime in order to get to Mass, *but if the commitment to do so is there then they will*”.⁴¹⁴ The Bishop seems clear what is getting in the way of reform: “Pope Francis is critical of those who ‘remain intransigently faithful to a particular Catholic style from the past’ (Evangelii Gaudium #94).”⁴¹⁵

For now, we will close this discussion of this type of emotional response. The contrast between dioceses is clear, however. The Bishop of Wrexham does not even seek to end on the upbeat, missionary tone of the Bishop of Plymouth: “SO, WITH HIM, LET’S DO IT!”⁴¹⁶ Or even a prayer. In his very stark second letter he finishes:

I have deliberately not introduced any financial considerations, and of course communities will pay for what they want. At some point the financial viability of maintaining under-used buildings, especially if any capital works are required, will become a major consideration and this should not be forgotten.⁴¹⁷

The letter ends and the reader is left in no doubt of the existential nature of the context and the emotional response felt by the bishop. A doctor has just delivered bad news and is offering no words of comfort. Wrexham, above all the other dioceses, feels like it’s on life-support and is not looking forward to the unfolding situation. That is not the

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Ibid.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid. Emphasis added.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ O’Toole, *Go...Make Disciples*.

⁴¹⁷ Brignall, *Into the Future - 2*.

response for most of the dioceses, but it shows most abruptly some of the challenges that many dioceses are facing and how, at least for one diocese, how very real questions about death in the nature of its life have become.

3. Theological ideas

Moving from affective response to the theological concepts at work, the ideas used by the dioceses can be categorised as follows:

1. **Those that relate to the overall nature of the Christian life and the Church.**

What it means, in a general manner, to live a holy life and descriptions of the mission of the Church fall in this category. Specific examples would include references to Jesus' command to love God and love neighbour, or referring to the Church as the Body of Christ or sacrament. This is the space for Dulles' models of the Church and Nicholas Healy's ideal-type ecclesiologies. Though such ideas point to essential truths they require a good deal of extension before pastoral application.

2. **Those that more generally describe a process or disposition inherent to the Christian life.** Repentance, discernment, mortification, formation, journeying, carrying one's cross, hopefulness might be some of the key theological themes here. Both individual believers and the Church can go through such movements. *These are the ideas we are most interested in, as they give some indication of a process of change.*

3. **Those practices inherent to the Christian life and the life of the Church.** Prayer, evangelising, participating in the sacraments. More specific ideas about the nature of the parish or concepts of the local church would fall here too.

Drawing on some or all of the above categories are ways in which dioceses seek to respond to their current context.

To note at the outset, many of the dioceses provide only brief explicitly theological reflections, or offer a relatively unsystematic series of Church and biblical teachings for reflection. Few too give much detailed discussion to theological concepts of change. Stating that the Church is 'missionary' is truthful, but does not provide us much rich reflection on how a diocese sees the journey of change unfolding in theological terms. Does renewal come automatically through God's favour? Or only after death? What

changes does the Church need to undergo to become more 'missionary'? These are related to our key questions, but are not dwelt on in any depth by our dioceses. Drawing out, therefore, the theologies at work will require some effort beyond surface reading. In fact, only two dioceses have extended reflections in their documentation that one might refer to as theological (in the manner discussed in Chapter One),⁴¹⁸ and only three make any reference to the concept of ecclesiology.⁴¹⁹ This is entirely understandable for documents intended for a non-specialist audience, yet suggests some early challenges in discerning what theologies and ecclesiologies are at work. It is clear too at the outset that these documents do not seek to situate themselves explicitly within various ecclesiological methodological debates. There is no consideration of liberation, feminist or comparative methodologies for example that I could find.

Beginning at the highest level, the titles given to the processes give some indication of their general theological emphasis. Of the seventeen plans, the most commonly recurring themes centre around Future (5 dioceses), Together (5), Hope (4), Planning (3), Mission (3). Three dioceses use positive journeying imagery. Some of the words are neutral but the general theological hue is immediately apparent. "Towards Death and Resurrection", "Walking the Way of the Cross" or "Called to Repentance" can be held up as titles that could have been used for these processes were the theological ideas of a different tone. In contrast to the "hard teaching" (John 6:60) of the Gospel, there might already be a sneaking suspicion of dioceses having sanitised their messages here and stripped out notions of cross, resurrection, suffering, pain and death in the Christian life. That one diocese's efforts I was told is more popularly known amongst some the clergy and faithful as "Backwards Together in Despair" at least begins to open up a potential tonal difference and horizon for different theological understandings.

The dominant ecclesiology

To draw out a core theology, from what has been analysed therefore, the dominant ecclesiology at work for most dioceses (understandably given the time in which these materials are written) is one which is in tune with the spirit of *Evangelii Gaudium*.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁸ Hexham and Newcastle; Lancaster. Briefer theological reflection is found in Arundel and Brighton; Brentwood; Liverpool; Plymouth; Salford; Southwark; Westminster;

⁴¹⁹ Lancaster; Northampton; Westminster.

⁴²⁰ Whether *Evangelii Gaudium* and other papal documents resonate with some of the paschal themes in this study would of course be another interesting area for study.

Portsmouth, in summarising its plan, focuses on mission and evangelisation, converting Catholics, trust in the Holy Spirit, and being outward-looking. Westminster focuses on mission and ministry, which includes worship, service and witness. Hexham and Newcastle provides the fullest expression of this theological approach:

Pope Francis is inviting us to become open minded and imaginative in how we become missionary evangelists. It is envisaged that our pilgrimage together 'in hope' will deepen our understanding of what it means to be the Church in our Diocese and to become closer friends of Jesus.⁴²¹

Evangelism is a key theme and Pope Francis' idea of 'missionary disciples' has captivated at least half of the dioceses. Plymouth states: "Pope Francis speaks of being 'missionary disciples'; each of us staying close to Jesus and deepening our love of Him, and at the same time, going out to others that they may come to follow Him, too. Each of us is called to be a 'disciplemaking disciple'. Further, a local Church which is not making disciples is failing in a fundamental aspect of its life. And the question we must ask ourselves, therefore, is 'are our parishes' places that make disciples?'"⁴²² *Evangelii Gaudium* is not the only authority used and similar material from *Lumen Gentium* completes the picture. Matthew 28: 16-20 understandably is a key refrain.

If this is the process envisaged, Hexham and Newcastle then summarises 'success' as including:

- "We hope for an increased enthusiasm and openness to the presence of the Holy Spirit through prayer"
- "We envisage a more 'outward-looking' Church, a community of 'missionary disciples'."
- "We see lay people becoming more prominent in the community."
- "There will be a more generally accepted acknowledgement that there will be clear indications as to what structural changes may be necessary."
- "Finally, we certainly hope that everyone will be engaged in and enthused by our review process"⁴²³

⁴²¹ *Forward Together In Hope - Preparing the Way*, Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, March 2015.

⁴²² O'Toole, *Go...Make Disciples*.

⁴²³ *Forward Together In Hope - Preparing the Way*, Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, March 2015.

All are worthy aims, theologically robust and speaking deep truths for the life of the church. It should not be seen that there is anything untruthful or untheological about these ideas necessarily. However, the question for us to consider is whether such a mission-focused theology tells the full story.

4. Paschal ecclesiology and Rahnerian change

As this thesis argues, such ecclesiologies above, whilst worthily offered, do not seem to grapple with the full range of ideas available to dioceses. Notably, few of the dioceses make much reference to the potential flaws in their approaches. There is a hope, of course, that these processes lead to reform and renewal, but not, it appears, much consideration of alternative theological approaches and other ways in which God may be moving in the world, nor much consideration of the ways in which God may be moving in decline and diminishment.

Having set the scene, turning to our core question, for the purposes of this study what is interesting is the real lack of paschal imagery, or other related imagery. It is unsurprising to find no references to *theologia crucis*, or a theology of Holy Saturday, as we explored in Chapter Three. However, concepts from the Beatitudes, of the humility and poverty of the Church, of the Church being brought low, of dark night are also almost entirely absent. There is almost no ecclesiological understanding of cross and resurrection in the process of change and what it might mean in the life of the Church to go on a journey to Calvary. Such language is not completely absent; however, it is certainly not dominant, nor at all central to the discussion, and the implications of very occasional references are not followed through. For example, there are only two references to the concept of “taking up your cross” in all the diocesan materials.⁴²⁴ Of the seventeen dioceses being analysed about three-quarters make a reference to the cross as a central part of the Christian journey, yet reflections are often brief.⁴²⁵ Only three make any extended reference to the paschal journey.⁴²⁶ Most of the dioceses foresee challenges, but not paschal challenges and there is almost no sense of them having to perhaps embrace something like a baptismal death to be open to new life. There is an implicit recognition,

⁴²⁴ Patrick O'Donoghue, *Fit for Mission*, Diocese of Lancaster, 2007; Moth, Richard, *Pastoral Letter for the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time*, 3rd February 2019, Diocese of Arundel and Brighton.

⁴²⁵ Arundel and Brighton; Birmingham; Brentwood; Clifton; Hexham and Newcastle; Lancaster; Liverpool; Middlesbrough; Northampton; Plymouth; Salford; Southwark.

⁴²⁶ Clifton; Hexham and Newcastle; Lancaster; Liverpool; Salford.

by embracing change, of processes of death through mortification, but again, very little recognition of this being something to grapple with explicitly (and no use of the term mortification specifically).

Given our proceeding analysis with Balthasar and Rahner, the following questions therefore arise:

- Are the dioceses really grappling with the idea that many of their structures will almost certainly die? They may implicitly acknowledge this by undergoing a process of change, but do they bring their attention towards this?
- Has the cross been unconsciously sanitised from these documents?
- What models of growth, new life, and resurrection are operating?
- Does the paschal mystery have any merit for these processes or it is excluded for good reason?

Hexham and Newcastle offer a good example of the generalised, but infrequent, way in which paschal ideas are used:

Of course, before we can evangelise we must first of all be evangelised ourselves. In other words, we must get to know Christ enter into a deep and personal relationship with Him, walk wholeheartedly in His way, enter into the whole life of Christ and this includes His passion suffering, death and resurrection.⁴²⁷

One priest from Hexham and Newcastle develops this truth for individuals for the life of the Church. Describing the results of their survey of clergy: “Some respondents see the current situation as a time of waiting for the new to emerge (one priest compares it to Jesus’ passion - We have to go through it, endure it, but with the hope that something new is coming)”.⁴²⁸ However, this isn’t taken further. As previously shown, Hexham and Newcastle’s predominant focus in on a missional ecclesiology.

Lancaster, in more extensive theological and historical reflections, at times strikes a different tone and begins to use the concepts that this thesis is exploring: “The Paschal Mystery is central both to our faith and to this implementation process, where radical

⁴²⁷ Seamus Cunningham, *Durham University Sermon*, October 2017.

⁴²⁸ *What Our Clergy are Saying*, Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, June 2016.

changes in parish structures are potential examples of the life-death resurrection mystery.”⁴²⁹ The Bishop develops this elsewhere and starts to nudge towards a theology that glorifies in suffering: “I said that change is difficult – indeed it can be a Cross – but once accepted and when truly of the Lord, it brings great joy and a wonderful freedom.”⁴³⁰

Lancaster also brings in the voice of John Paul II when he was asked about the decline of Christianity in the West:

The Gospel is not a promise of easy success. It does not promise a comfortable life to anyone. It makes demands and, at the same time, it is a great promise...the promise of victory through faith for man, who is subject to many trials and setbacks.... To find life, one must lose life; to be born, one must die; to save oneself, one must take up the cross. This is the essential truth of the Gospel, which always and everywhere is bound to meet with man's protest.⁴³¹

What would it mean for a diocese to truly take up its cross? Overall, however, such imagery is little used or barely developed by the dioceses. Quoting from the Catechism, Arundel and Brighton offer for reflection: “the Church, urged on by the Spirit of Christ, must walk the road Christ himself walked, a way of poverty and obedience, of service and self-sacrifice even to death, a death from which he emerged victorious by his resurrection.”⁴³² However, it is not clear what is at work here, as the theme of obedience unto death does not bear relation to other material in the document where the themes are once more predominantly missional. No diocese, overall, seems to actually advocate walking the way of the cross and accepting a possible radical breaking down of its current structures.

Turning back to Chapter Two and acknowledging Rahner's outline method for change, we find a little more resonance in the diocesan materials but again quite an absence in echoing key ideas. To recap Rahner's central consideration of experiments: all of history is an experiment for Rahner and he draws us back once again to the courageous way in

⁴²⁹ O'Donoghue, *Fit for Mission*.

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

⁴³² Arundel and Brighton, *The Word who is Life: Vision for Mission. Resources for Reflection*.

which it needs to be approached: "Church history is the most radical experiment: where it is not, where it becomes nervous traditionalism, it may perhaps still be the history of sinful man in the Church, but no longer of the Church as she ought to be according to the will of Jesus."⁴³³ Through experiment, we are able to discover what is changeable and what is unchangeable, what in fact is true and permanent in the life of the Church.

The following are the key things to take away from the materials in light of our reading of Rahner. Firstly, that dioceses, in many instances do appear to follow a method that is broadly in line with some of his ideas. More could be done exploring the processes of individual dioceses, but many of his more general concepts covering discernment, being hopeful, patient and dialogical are present in the materials.

However, two key things seem missing, or at least would warrant clearer engagement from these diocesan processes. The first is that Rahner's framework stands and falls on the basis of getting to grips with what is changeable and unchangeable in the life of the Church. If change is carried out in circumstances where certain changes are not even debated, is it likely to succeed? Would Rahner say, as he implies writing for the German Synod in *The Shape of the Church to Come*, that dioceses are doomed to fail in their processes if they do not manage to attend to certain root matters? I think perhaps he would. Deciding whether the dioceses have fallen short in this regard is not easy, perhaps only possible in hindsight and in a study that goes beyond textual analysis. It is also significantly affected by what one believes is changeable and unchangeable. Nevertheless, some dioceses are notable for acknowledging certain reforming ideas but saying that making decisions in these areas is outside of their control.⁴³⁴ More would therefore need to be done to explore whether dioceses set aside matters which are in fact changeable. All that can be said for now is it is not a debate to which any give detailed consideration.

⁴³³ Rahner, *Opportunities for faith: elements of a modern spirituality*, 218.

⁴³⁴ In relation to some of the 'hot button' issues (e.g., ordaining married priests and women) the Diocese of Brentwood makes this clear specifically: Webb, Steve. *Steven Webb Debunks Some Myths*. Diocese of Brentwood, 2017. However, another diocesan planner also commented to me that certain other ideas, which in this instance would have given lay people greater involvement in the running of their parish, were clearly 'off the table' from the start of their process. Again, this is not to make a case for the merits of any particular ideas - some would of course claim that certain ideas lie in the 'unchangeable' category - merely to highlight Rahner's distinction and how carefully it needs to be discerned. How change occurs within constrained circumstances is an interesting extension to this work and especially Rahner's thinking from Chapter Two.

The second area to examine is when Rahner critiques experiments in the Church of his day, where the ecclesiastical legislator's form of experiment is purely selective and not creative, merely offering a number of choices, already known about, from which to choose. Such experimental language is almost entirely absent from the materials and processes we are exploring (in fact the term is only used once by Hexham and Newcastle Diocese in reference to street preaching). This need not concern of course, the language of creativity, for example, is quite apparent. Moreover, in Rahner's conception, these diocesan processes are certainly forms of experiment, as they are making real changes to the life of the Church. The processes are also in line with Rahner's desire to see the Church planning its history. However, whether they are experiments which allow dioceses to help assess what is changeable and are open to the ultimate unknowability of God would again warrant further consideration. Rahnerian language about the unforeseeability or uncontrollability of the future is again absent. So too is an overall sense of the experimental quality to the Church's life. Our aim in this study has been to look predominantly at paschal and not Rahnerian concerns, but our conjecture nevertheless, though it can only be a tentative one for now, is still that Rahner would not find these processes to be experimental in the manner he presents.

5. Change management - presence of theory and typology

The previous sections have sought to draw out some of the expressly theological and spiritual ideas at work in the diocesan documents. Those are unlikely to be the only influences and guiding ideas, however, and it is important before we conclude this brief review to note what else may be at work. We will now look at an area that may be seen to sit somewhat uncomfortably alongside church decision-making processes: the world of management theory.

I will not seek to perform a detailed analysis of the theological merits of different schools, models or theories of change management. As we saw on Chapter One, others, such as David Coghlan, have sought to adapt, analyse and apply various management approaches in a spiritual context. If one avoids setting up a particular school of change management as an all-encompassing theory (i.e, in a way which clearly crowds out theological ideas), there is much that can be learned from such tools (e.g. people's likely psychological response to process of change, ways to improve team dynamics and communication, the best way to monitor and maintain property assets). Yet, I have substantial reservations

about the use of management theory detached entirely from concepts of the action of God in the world.⁴³⁵ The world and the language we inhabit is now thick with ideas from management theory and capitalism and it would be remarkable to find that diocesan change management efforts are entirely removed from such concepts. As well as the reflections we have had about theological frameworks, for now, it will also be enough to suggest that dioceses cannot be said to be immune from the charge of being in part captured by other concepts that warrant deeper theological exploration.

6. Change management in seventeen dioceses

Turning to explore the Diocesan materials in the context of managerial concepts. Firstly, none of the dioceses make any explicit reference to schools, models or theories of change management that may be used by large organisations (e.g. Systems Theory, Complexity Theory, Lewin's Change Management Model, McKinsey 7 S Model, Kotter's Theory, Satir Change Curve, Kübler Ross Curve). Whether this is because such ideas are being explicitly rejected, are not known about or are just not discussed cannot be immediately decided. Moreover, there is clearly caution in some arenas. Lancaster's bishop notes: "It strikes me as essential to keep in mind from the outset that we do not plan a re-structuring of the diocese for mission or implement change like a business or a secular organisation."⁴³⁶ There is, at first analysis, no explicit borrowing of concepts from the world of management theory.

However, management and change management language is frequently present in some of these documents. The Diocese of Brentwood talks about "management of a diocesan change plan" and that "it is important to manage the situation proactively"⁴³⁷, Salford "the management of the Diocese",⁴³⁸ Lancaster the "management of parishes",⁴³⁹ Wrexham about "asset management",⁴⁴⁰ Portsmouth about "volunteer management".⁴⁴¹ Nevertheless, again, the use of such language is not overwhelming; five of the Dioceses do not appear to make a reference to management in any setting.

⁴³⁵ See again Stephen Pattison, "Mystical Management".

⁴³⁶ Patrick O'Donoghue, *Fit for Mission*, Diocese of Lancaster, 2007.

⁴³⁷ Steve Webb, *A Vision for our Diocese of Brentwood 2019. Working Together to Evangelise our Diocese*. Address, 2017.

⁴³⁸ Salford, *Preparing the Way: Consultation Report*.

⁴³⁹ O'Donoghue, Patrick. *Fit for Mission - Proposals*, Diocese of Lancaster, 2007.

⁴⁴⁰ Brignall, *Into the Future - 1*.

⁴⁴¹ *The Framework for Collaboration and Team Descriptors*, Diocese of Portsmouth, October 2016.

Given that the material only loosely talks about ideas and processes of management, a more oblique way to explore the change management ideas involved involves some analysis of wider language. It is interesting to note the overriding imagery being used and then consider to what extent this is theologically rooted or otherwise. Even though there may be no explicit management models at work (and there may even be a rejection of such ideas) a process of weakly-defined change management (an institution reflects on experience, guided by the Spirit, and decides and implements future actions) is still at work. It is therefore interesting to note the thrust of language and the imagery used by dioceses and whether any concepts brought in from extensive management literature begin to dominate to the exclusion of other ideas.⁴⁴²

Looking therefore at the general use of other language, in a short presentation, the Diocese of Arundel and Brighton talks about “roles” required for the future, “effectiveness” and “factors” which have caused the current situation. This language, is heavy with the concepts of production. However, (again noting the crude nature of such a comparison) none of these words are used in English in the NRSV or New Jerusalem Bible and the roots of these words (role, effective, factor) are used only a handful of times in either translation. Much more than language of “management” such words are used throughout the dioceses’ processes. “Resources”, “strategy”, “objective” and “maximise” stand out as other words whose presence in these documents is conspicuous by their near-absence from scripture. The Diocese of Brentwood talks of “Our Objectives: Maximise the opportunities for evangelisation; Maximise sacramental provision; Maximise the opportunities for putting faith into action through charitable works.”⁴⁴³ There seem strange phrases to have chosen. What is at work here?

These words are harsh ones to have chosen initially and the point cannot be stressed too heavily in preliminary analysis such as this. Such concepts need to be balanced by analysis of other words, as above, like “hope”, “discernment”, “prayer” which are more clearly

⁴⁴² Linn Tonstad, in a slightly separate context, is equally wary of attempts to assume “the innocence and transparency of theological argument” affirming that if a theologian states, say, equality between the persons of the Trinity at the outset of their argument, that does not leave them free of the charge that their language is later captured by ideas of subordination and obedience. Equally here, if these diocesan documents lead with theological ideas, but are later proved to be captured by non-theological language, we cannot naïvely ignore that development. Tonstad, *God and Difference: the Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude*, 2. More work is needed here, however.

⁴⁴³ *Working Together to Evangelise Our Diocese*, Diocese of Brentwood, Summer 2017.

theologically grounded and are present in the documentation. However, on the topic of management, the analysis does appear to be moving in an interesting direction and starts to lay the foundations for deeper analysis of the way in which language is being used in these current diocesan change efforts. Deeper study would be required to draw this out further, however, alongside reservations about the lack of theological reflection we can add in an initial suggestion that managerial concepts occasionally seem to dominate.

7. Conclusion

Seventeen dioceses, in various parts of England and Wales, led by different bishops, and not responding to any coordinated process by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, will inevitably have chosen to respond to a changing religious and organisational context in diverse ways. I have not sought to analyse the reasons for this diversity in depth, yet their processes will have been substantially shaped by the individuals involved and particular diocesan contexts: bishops differ in their spiritualities, and demographically fluid and international London is different to Wales or the North of England. However, this diversity of response is interesting to note for another reason: that, as we saw in Chapter One, whereas Canon Law and the experience of tradition is often a firm guide in the life of the Church, there is for this current moment no clear way in which to continue walking the Way. It appears, most often, that responses are having to be generated afresh at the local level. Dioceses, it seems, are pressing into unknown territory, into a liminal space and few seem particularly clear about the ecclesiology with which they are operating. We may be pleased to see subsidiarity at work, but I think it must seriously be asked, to the hierarchy as well as theologians, if good enough resources exist that help us see how material change is actually handled in practice.

What is clear from the documents is that all of these dioceses (and some of those not analysed in detail) are finding similar challenges and opportunities in this moment of the Church. They have all responded in the various ways discussed. For the purposes of our study, the main point stands for now that there is very little of a paschal hermeneutic running through these efforts. This, if the argument of the previous chapters is valued, seems to their detriment. In a text-based study we cannot ascertain how these processes have taken place in practice. However, the question can still be asked therefore as to whether there may be a better way to respond to the will of God in this changing context. To such conclusions we can now turn.

Conclusion: Clues for an ecclesiology of Church diminishment

This study has focused on a particular moment in the Church's recent history, bringing its attention most especially to near-contemporary diocesan plans and their associated challenges and theologies. It has sought too to explore a theology which could be of service to the Church at all times. As we begin to conclude, it is instructive to turn back just a moment further in the pastoral planning processes of one English diocese.⁴⁴⁴

1. How long, O Lord?

Following on from the *Your Kingdom Come Pastoral Plan* of 1998 (which would not look at all out of place in its themes and structure as a diocesan planning document of today) Bishop John of Middlesbrough Diocese writes in the diocesan newspaper, April 2000:

In the last few months parishioners...will have noticed significant changes in their parish structures. Neighbouring parishes which have been accustomed to having their own individual parish priest now find themselves *twinned* with the parish next door. That is likely to happen quite rapidly in other parts of the diocese also as the reality of our present diminishing number of priests shapes our pastoral arrangements.⁴⁴⁵

He notes that the diocese at that time has 89 diocesan priests, sustaining 97 parishes (appearing to mean active priests, rather than including those retired).

20 years later, writing in 2018, the next Bishop of Middlesbrough, Terence Drainey, writes about his sense of how the situation has changed. At this point there are 47 diocesan priests and 85 parishes in the diocese, predicted to fall to 30 priests by 2024.⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴⁴ Though further study would be required to verify this, one can easily imagine that it offers a relatively representative snapshot of the last few decades for dioceses in England and Wales. In fact, a conclusion of this study is that a great deal more research would be valuable in this area: historically, sociologically, theologically.

⁴⁴⁵ Bishop John, "The Changing Face of Our Diocese," *Middlesbrough Diocesan Catholic Voice* April 2000.

⁴⁴⁶ Diocese of Middlesbrough, *Year Book and Ordo* (Wigan: Gemini Print, 2019). NB: of the 47 active priests, 4 were ordained in the 1960s, making them at least 75 years old in 2019, and 14 in the 1970s,

Bishop Terence has by this point overseen further reorganisation processes across the diocese, between 2010 and 2014 most especially, consulting Northampton Diocese about processes they followed and engaging outside consultants from the Centre for Catholic Studies at the University of Durham.

Overarchingly, he expects the current trends and reorganisations to continue, stating that:

[in] our Church of the Diocese of Middlesbrough, there is the constant knowledge that our presbyterate is, by and large, getting older and older. We are almost at the point where we have as many retired as active priests in the diocese and the number of retirees is bound to increase and the number of active clergy is constantly dwindling. Already I have had to begin the process of informing parishes that they will not have a resident priest in the future and mass will be supplied as and when possible. And this is only the beginning. It will be one of my regular tasks of the future.⁴⁴⁷

The prognosis is a familiar one from the diocesan plans we reviewed in Chapter Four. However, more unusually, elsewhere he writes quite honestly about the shortage of priests:

In the last report to the Holy Father in 2010, I expressed the hope (somewhat naïve in hindsight) that by informing everyone of the situation regarding vocations and priests stepping down from pastoral responsibility, we might have been able to foster vocations to the priesthood, the permanent diaconate and to lay ministry in sufficient numbers to provide for our needs. Sadly, this has not happened.⁴⁴⁸

making them at least 65 years old – i.e. c.40% in total (assuming all ordained aged 25, which is likely an underestimate, and therefore suggests there are other priests older than 65).

⁴⁴⁷ "Bishop Terry's June 2019 Voice Column," <https://middlesbrough-diocese.org.uk/bishopterrydrainey/?p=1010>.

⁴⁴⁸ He is referring to his *Ad Limina* visit to Rome. Terence Drainey, "Bishop Terry's November 2018 Voice Column: Facing Our Future With Hope." <https://middlesbrough-diocese.org.uk/bishopterrydrainey/?p=976>. He writes during Advent 2017: "It is only when we are awakened to the danger of a particular situation that we begin to react." "Bishop Terry's Pastoral Letter for Advent 2017," <https://middlesbrough-diocese.org.uk/bishopterrydrainey/?p=936>.

Acknowledging, in essence, that previous plans have not worked as he might have hoped, that people are not as converted, he continues:

I feel that if we are not able to achieve such a solution or no solution at all, then we will need to turn our minds to the question of the viability of Middlesbrough as a diocese; whether, indeed, it is not the amalgamation of parishes that we should be looking at but the amalgamation of the diocese with another!⁴⁴⁹

The language around solutions and viability might, given our discussion in Chapter Four, bring pause for thought. However, that need not be our central concern here. Bishop Terence, perhaps first among bishops in the documentation I have surveyed, acknowledges that successive pastoral planning processes are having so little of the desired effect that the end, the death even, of the diocese may now be in sight. There is a moment of hope expressed elsewhere, in that the number of priests existing at the foundation of the diocese in 1878 was not dissimilar to today.⁴⁵⁰ However, there is a definite sense of a challenge, simply put, that nothing seems to 'work', nothing seems to bear fruit of the kind apparently hoped for: the number of priests continues to fall, praying for vocations to the priesthood is not producing the desired results, mass attendances are further declining, more drastic reorganisations of the diocese are looming.

The call, from Matthew 28 to "make disciples of all nations", is reiterated over those years, in the pastoral plan of 1998 and again when discussing parish restructuring in 2013. It is a call that is echoed in the pastoral plans and restructuring documents of the other dioceses we have surveyed. Yet, Bishop Terence writes: "I think we have forgotten how to be a missionary Church."⁴⁵¹

2. Measuring success

What would success have meant for these diocesan processes, firstly by their own standard, not by some of the theological standards we have been considering in this

⁴⁴⁹ "Bishop Terry's November 2018 Voice Column."

⁴⁵⁰ *Preface* to Diocese of Middlesbrough, *Year Book and Ordo*.

⁴⁵¹ "Bishop Terry's June 2019 Voice Column."

study? Turning to the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle in 2001 gives us both a similar historical story and also a frame:

The Church and Catholic attitudes have changed a lot since Vatican II. Some think of this as desert time, like the years God's people spent on the way to the Promised Land and the days of Jesus in the wilderness. But from those times came growth. The same is true today. The key is total confidence in God and trust in each other. When priests and people work together and share the best practice, the Church will grow.⁴⁵²

Boldly stated as the purpose of the *Forward Together in Hope* efforts in 2017: "The aim - to enable growth" and "'imagine new ways' of being Church".⁴⁵³ If the commonly stated metrics around declining numbers of mass attendees and priests are taken as the 'problems' then it is logical to presume that reversal of those numbers is the 'growth' to which these plans are geared. And yet, in Middlesbrough, Hexham and Newcastle and elsewhere there is very little indication that this is being achieved. Plans have become more detailed in some places perhaps, consultation processes sometimes more complete, but yet the story does not apparently change, and in fact appears to become more severe, leading in the near future conceivably to the disappearance of certain dioceses entirely. A similar tale could be told for many religious orders; there is, it appears, often very little transformative in the work of these planning processes. Sharing "best practice" is not it seems leading to renewed growth in the life of the Church.

3. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done

What can we conclude from this and from our preceding analysis? That our plans are not God's plans? That dioceses are sinful, or merely perhaps disorganised and unable to go the places they would like to go? That God is absent or has turned his favour elsewhere? In such a context are we left able merely to lament? These have been some of the questions hovering during the course of this thesis.

Our purpose was not to suggest particular programmatic ways in which dioceses might arrest their decline, nor even to evaluate whether pastoral plans were appropriately

⁴⁵² The Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, *A Diocesan Vision: Our Future Together*, (2001), 9.

⁴⁵³ *Why Partnerships? – Some Key Messages*, Hexham and Newcastle Diocese, 2017.

implemented. There are also, no doubt, better and worse ways to evangelise and spread the Gospel. Pressing as those questions often seem, this has not been our chief concern here. We began by asking two questions. Firstly, how paradigmatic is the full arc of the paschal mystery (notably, through death) for an ecclesiology of institutional church diminishment? Secondly, is this appropriately appreciated in contemporary Catholic diocesan reform and renewal efforts?

Surveying appropriate literature led towards Karl Rahner's principles for a changing Church. It seemed important to situate our questions upon a discussion about how and whether the Church changes more generally. As we saw, Rahner does not at all want to stop the Church planning. He has, instead, thoughts about how to do this in a theologically robust fashion. There is much to be learned in exploring whether the principles he develops are found within contemporary pastoral plans, and adopting some of his ideas where lacking. Summarily, we found in Chapter Four a probable absence of key parts of his methodological approach, especially with regard to experimentation, grounded within the asking of questions about what is truly changeable and unchangeable in Church practice.

At the end of Chapter Two we also explored whether the challenge of putting theory into practice was merely a question of trying a little harder. However, the sense throughout the analysis has been that perhaps dioceses are too often trying harder but in the wrong places. Most pressingly, the conclusions of Chapter Three lead us to ask ourselves whether the right aims at all are under consideration. We concluded that the purpose of diocesan planning processes should not be mere growth, but a closer journeying with Christ in the paschal process; not in a way which subjects everything else to this and ignores all other matters in the life of discipleship, but certainly not in a way which ignores the centrality of questions about death and resurrection in the life of the Church. Some dioceses had planning processes which seemed to more closely reflect core Gospel truths than others; however, in general we found that none had any serious consideration of their paschal story. We state this conclusion aware, in as much humility as possible, of the challenges of developing some of these ideas in pastoral practice.

4. Remembering the importance of the task

This is not the sort of conclusion which allows a rush to swift answers. However, I feel such ideas need a greater airing, despite too the natural resistance I feel even within myself to contemplate institutional and organisational death. Before detailed discussion of future pastoral practice, a debate about the merits of the ideas in this thesis would be warranted.

Nevertheless, given the context briefly outlined in Chapter One, and what can be seen in numerous commentaries about churches today, there can be no real doubt in 2020 that institutional churches in Britain are currently in material decline and, with no change of course, are likely to continue to undergo very substantial changes in their life in the coming decades. The Church has always been wounded in many ways (e.g., by persecution, scandals, corruption, division),⁴⁵⁴ but I have sought to illustrate that particularly at this time, many of our existing structures will experience a kind of literal or effective material death, whether organically (to be compared with natural death from old age, the effects of sin, or death from the action of other material parts of the world – i.e., ‘illness’) or, should they choose, through an inevitable consequence of their free choice (to be compared to freely facing a death on the cross).

A church building closing and being sold is a kind of death; a change in practice or liturgy is a kind of death. Changes could be likened to evolutions/transformations/metamorphoses (and not necessarily in the direction of ‘progress’) but we should not, we have been arguing, avoid the image of death. The Church as the Body of Christ may continue, but even before the end of the world, that which was will pass away and churches should not ignore this. We have noted that this is not without hope – there is in fact much promise – yet it is not currently a particularly pleasant process for the institutional Church to be experiencing. Whether through external factors beyond its apparent control, the sinfulness of its members, or failings of its own, the Church and its people are experiencing significant amounts of pain and loss. Church abuses notwithstanding, if at least some of the pain bears some correlation to the closure of one’s local parish church then there is much more to come. The pain may not be possible to avoid, but this study has at least been wondering whether it might still be possible to gain a greater understanding.

⁴⁵⁴ See Antonio Rosmini, *The Five Wounds of the Church* (Leominster: Fowler Wright, 1987).

5. Approaching death well

If the analysis of Chapter Three is accepted, what emerges is that a new approach needs to be taken towards inevitable and necessary deaths of the Church. More reflection is needed generally as to how God is moving in this period of diminishment. Moreover, further reflection is needed about growth and new life, to ensure that that which is sustained through human endeavour does not keep the Church from its paschal story and block the way to true new life.

The conclusion of Chapter Four is that, almost habituated to approaching decline in a particular manner, dioceses need to find a way to, with God's grace, move in different directions. Perhaps it is a time for their completion along current trajectories, towards bodily and temporal death. They would not be the first dioceses in history to undergo this. If so, however, such death should not be a death surrounded by talk of 'growth' and 'new life', with resurrection claimed when it is nothing of the sort. From bodily death we might trust in God's resurrection, but that is God's work and not ours. Perhaps though, in mortification and other material deaths, there is also resurrectional new life available to dioceses within their current structures in the coming years. Again, the future cannot be foreseen. Nevertheless, further planning processes of the type that we have analysed do not seem sufficient.

In terms of mapping a way forward, Rahner and Balthasar together can lead to new reflections on death and new life in the Church. Rahner's principles in Chapter Two are valuable aids to this discernment, opening the way to experimentation around new ways of being Church, but in a way which is deeply committed to the tradition, a tradition which is always being born anew. We have been conscious of the dangers of calling for the death of the Church throughout and Rahner especially can help to avoid key pitfalls. He can help with questions about when to resist parish closures, when to embrace disruptive new practices, when to stand firm against changes in a rapidly changing world, and when to lead.

6. The Word made flesh

Ultimately, this study is just another document, another perspective on the changing Church, adding to many already written. The aim here has been to turn over some perhaps underappreciated and underdeveloped areas of the Church's story which seem

worth examining afresh in these changing times. Sometimes the least helpful thing that we can do is to act whilst we are still blind. Yet, as we saw earlier, we must ultimately act. Jesus is the only one for whom word and action is the same, whose word is deed and whose deed is word. We have seen in this analysis that part of the Church today, as in all times, but in particular when it comes to understanding its changing place in the world, is struggling a little with word and deed. Most of all it often seems to be ignoring the possibility of its own death, which, if stepped towards in fear and trembling, at the chosen time, may be the very thing which is necessary to precede true life. All will continue to be well, despite such struggles. And yet I hope, following prayerful discernment, today's Church may still find a way to set its face for Jerusalem.

Appendix: Diocesan documentation - summary and methodological notes

There are twenty-two Catholic Dioceses in England and Wales.⁴⁵⁵ A sample of their published materials was taken in January 2018 and again in February 2019. This was done through prior knowledge and by searching diocesan websites for information relevant to this study, either contemporary or recently historic. The sampling found documentation (mainly in PDF form) for seventeen of the dioceses. When analysed, the material was supplemented with occasional news articles and website content, predominantly written and in a handful of cases audio-visual.

Documents were chosen which were plainly intended to address similar contexts facing the Catholic Church and were aimed at some or all of the following issues:

- the mission of the Church in contemporary Britain.
- how to reorganise a diocese in response to i) fewer priests ii) fewer lay congregants iii) too many churches for current pastoral needs.
- how, more generally, the Church should approach its future and be organised locally.

The documents had diverse formats and seemed designed to serve a variety of purposes, including: as consultation materials about possible diocesan changes (incorporating materials to guide prayer and reflection); as pastoral letters; to outline already agreed restructuring plans; as newsletters.

The sampled materials cover the period 2005 (Westminster) to early 2019 (Liverpool). The largest amount of documentation, from Lancaster, was published between 2007 and 2009. Most materials cover recent years, 2015-19 (Arundel and Brighton, Birmingham, Brentwood, Clifton, East Anglia, Hexham and Newcastle, Liverpool, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Salford, Shrewsbury, Wrexham).

⁴⁵⁵ Solely for the purpose of making the research more manageable I have excluded dioceses in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Sociological analyses will often extend to these geographies however.

In addition, at least one other diocese (Leeds) is known to have undergone a substantial reorganisation of parish life within the past decade.⁴⁵⁶ However, documents for this process were not immediately and obviously publicly available (that Leeds has a relatively new website design is perhaps one explanation). Therefore, it is likely that of the five dioceses without sampled documentation there would be relevant material in a more detailed, archival study. This was not felt important at the outset of the process, given that the main sample covers well over half of the dioceses, seventeen of twenty-two.

Those dioceses sampled have also, most probably, had varying approaches to how much they publish (documentation like this would have a reasonable level of background and supplementary material required for its production). There will also be private material not available from sampling this way: meeting minutes, draft documentation, internal correspondence. Analysis of this other material would provide a richer picture, but again this was not felt immediately important to achieve the intended purpose. Interviewing people involved in the production of these documents, or within the intended audience, would be an opportunity for further study. Informal interviews were carried out in two dioceses.

Of the seventeen dioceses, the scale of documentation found ranged substantially, from two letters totalling 9 pages (Wrexham), to 678 pages of material in 7 documents (Lancaster), over 200 pages in over 20 documents (Hexham and Newcastle), and 96 pages in 25 documents (Salford).

In part, this likely reflects very different processes being carried out. Eleven of the dioceses (e.g., Hexham and Newcastle, Brentwood) were engaged in multi-year processes, with questionnaires sent to churches, clergy and laity, multiple consultation meetings, public drafting and re-drafting of final documentation. Four of the dioceses appeared to produce documentation largely without detailed public consultation. Two dioceses took an approach quite different to most other dioceses and focused on fundraising rather than reorganisation. This study does not make a claim as to whether longer or shorter processes are preferable, more detailed or less detailed processes of consultation.

⁴⁵⁶ Jonathan Wynne-Jones, "Save our churches: A congregation of 200 'is not viable'," *The Telegraph* 23 August 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/2608608/Save-our-churches-A-congregation-of-200-is-not-viable.html> [accessed 25 March 2020].

Prior to a first detailed examination, the documentation covered just over 1,250 pages in total of written material. The foregoing shows that the sample is therefore not comprehensive, but it is extensive. 50% of the total material (by page volume) covers Lancaster, and 80% of the total material covers 25% of the sampled dioceses (Hexham and Newcastle, Lancaster, Salford).

Similar material in an Anglican context and internationally (notably from the Archdiocese of Detroit's *Unleash the Gospel Pastoral Letter*) was used at times to give context to the analysis.

A few other points are helpful:

- The documentation was used to analyse the implicit or explicit ecclesiologies and theologies operating in diocesan processes designed to deal with change. Whether using this material is a good way in which to discover the ecclesiologies at work is open for debate. To note initially, there may be other theologies (perhaps more nuanced ones, perhaps more challenging ones?) in the minds of those coordinating the efforts, which have been kept private for particular reasons. This cannot immediately be known; what was analysed is the way in which dioceses have chosen to present material publicly and what was put into written form. Further work would need to be done to assess to what extent the sampled documents tell the full story.
- No assumption should be made about the amount of documentation found and the relative rigour of diocesan responses to the current context of the church. There are both good arguments to be made for dioceses to publish extensive material and also relatively little. Most obviously, in the case of Lancaster, Hexham and Newcastle, and Salford, the amount of documentation is relatively overwhelming for your 'average' member of the faithful or clergy. Shorter documents may have pastoral and tactical merit.⁴⁵⁷
- A related point is that though most of the documentation is clearly intended to communicate to a broad audience of lay faithful and clergy, this is not to assume at the outset that bishops (who oversee these dioceses) are under any obligation to produce documentation like this or administer their processes of change in

⁴⁵⁷ The reception of these documents would be an interesting area for further study.

these various ways.⁴⁵⁸ The study deals with dioceses who have taken a variety of different approaches to consultation, all of which had some public facing documentation. As mentioned, though normative arguments about the benefit of extensive or limited consultation may exist they are not assumed.

- In addition, though an argument was developed in the introductory chapter to suggest that the sorts of issues the documents address (e.g. the need for fewer churches in response to fewer priests and congregants) are likely to have been more pressing in recent years, finding more contemporary documentation should not lead to the assumption that similar processes have not been carried out at other times in recent decades. The early signs of the issues these dioceses are trying to address have been known about since at least the 1970s. In response to declining numbers of clergy and those in religious life, dioceses and religious orders have been regularly reorganising themselves in various ways for decades. In fact, part of the discussion of this thesis is whether dioceses have been repeating processes of reorganisation that may warrant deeper theological examination.
- How any process is actually implemented is likely far more significant to the life of a diocese than any documentation published. A desk-based study such as this will be limited in its scope here, however. Therefore, if good theology is found in any documents, good implementation cannot be assumed. Likewise, weaker theology in a few diocesan documents might still be carried through in implementation by strong pastoral approaches. The crucial point here is that, though this study makes theological reflections about which diocesan approaches seem truer to their Christian calling, one cannot draw conclusions about which dioceses seem overall to be responding more faithfully to their current context, nor which are seeing more fruits from their efforts. Some dioceses may even take a paschal or Rahnerian approach to change, despite what is written in published materials. Such an analysis is far beyond the scope of this study. Again, a study which interviewed members of dioceses about how well such processes of change were received and implemented would likely prove rewarding. Finally, however, though little will be said about the way in which the processes under discussion are implemented, this does not make the exercise futile; if no diocese is shown

⁴⁵⁸ Referring to the author of documents as the bishop is used as shorthand. In many instances these materials would have been produced collaboratively with a number of authors.

to have a very robust ecclesiological approach to change, or if one approach is found to be more theologically appropriate than others, that will still provide valuable insight.

Bibliography

Diocesan Materials

The bibliography includes everything referenced in the body of the thesis and also other key documents for each diocesan programme studied. However, it is not summative of all material consulted, which would include news articles, diocesan webpages, assorted presentation materials, prayer and reflections materials, videos, and more. Documentation was mainly found on websites. The author would gladly share full materials if asked.

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The Word Who Is Life: Vision for Mission. Resources for Reflection, Presentation, Diocese of Arundel and Brighton, 2017.

The Word Who Is Life: Pastoral Plan, Diocese of Arundel and Brighton, 2018.

Moth, Richard, *Pastoral Letter for the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time*, 3rd February 2019, Diocese of Arundel and Brighton.

Birmingham: *Future Planning*

Longley, Bernard. *Pastoral Letter of the Archbishop of Birmingham for the Fifth Sunday of Lent. 24-25 March 2012*. Archdiocese of Birmingham.

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Why Partnerships? – Some Key Messages, Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, 2017.

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