



## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Being Occasional Observations from  
SAINT BONAVENTURE HOUSE OF STUDIES  
Of  
THE COMMUNITY OF ST. FRANCIS, CHICAGO  
FRANCISCANS OF RECONCILIATION  
ECUMENICAL CATHOLIC COMMUNION

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### WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED “CHURCH”? A Continuation of the Conversation<sup>1</sup>

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In the Community of St. Francis / St. Bonaventure House of Studies we have been discussing the problem with the word “Church”—or more precisely, Bishop Rafe Adams and I have been kicking it around. The etymology of the word has to do with a structure (*κυρίακον* Lord’s house) in which the assembly of the faithful (*εκκλησια*) gathers for worship. Alas, *εκκλησια* (which is used over one hundred times in the New Testament and is included as an article of faith in both the Nicene and Apostle’s creeds) is translated into English (and other Germanic languages) with a word derived from a physical structure. Over time the word was also used for institutional structures as well. Hence, many think of “Church” as either an incorporated organization (what we have called since the early nineteenth century a “denomination”) or a specific building used for worship (as in “the church at the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> and Main”).

Our discussion has led us to wonder if we ought not to revert to the Greek word for the assembly of the faithful gathered by the relationship to our Lord and with each other. For example we would recite those articles in the creeds as “. . .we believe in the holy catholic *ekklesia*. . .” and “. . .we believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic *ekklesia*. . .” If we began to use this wording we might have

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<sup>1</sup> This is a continuation of the conversation started by Fr. Kevin Yell in his article “What is This Thing Called ‘Church’?” *The Progressive Catholic Review: An Evangelical and Ecumenical Discourse* (Pentecost 2010 Vol. 1 No. 2) <http://www.csfeccc.org/sfvhouse/ecr/v1n22.pdf>

to think more deeply about the importance of relationship in this article of faith, and indeed the importance of relationship in Christian life and praxis.

We have several excellent sources for re-conceptualizing this thing called “Chur. .” oops, I mean “Ecclesia.” We can start with the Gospels, *Acts*, and the epistles. We can also learn from more recent theologians. I would particularly suggest (in order of publication):

Hans Küng, *The Church*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976 (originally published as *Die Kirche* in 1967).

Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*. New York: Crossroad, 1978 (originally published as *Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums* in 1976); Chapter VII Christianity as Church.

Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991.

Carl E. Braaten, *Mother Church: Ecclesiology and Ecumenism*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998.

Richard P. McBrien, *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism*. New York: HarperOne, 2008.

If you begin to ask what is this thing we are in—whatever we call it—let us know what you come up with. We will most likely publish a few pieces with our extended thoughts on the matter in *The Progressive Catholic Review*. If you develop yours, we’d like the opportunity to include it as well.