

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time: The Living Church

I want to begin today by speaking about Fr. Avery Cardinal Dulles. First of all, you are probably familiar with the name Dulles, as in Dulles International Airport in Washington, DC. The airport was named after Cardinal Dulles' father, John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State in the 1950's under President Dwight D. Eisenhower. He promoted the US involvement in NATO to fight the threat of communism in Europe and founded SEATO, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization to fight communism in Southeast Asia.

Although the Dulles family had a long history of public service, particularly as secretaries of state, Avery Dulles' life took a different path. He was raised a Presbyterian, but then turned agnostic. He was attending Harvard University when one day he went for a walk along the Charles River. He saw a beautiful flowering tree and as he stared at it he sensed a profound presence of God. He decided to search for a way to come closer to God. He became a Roman Catholic. After serving in the Navy in World War II, he entered the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, where he was ordained a priest and sent for further studies. He was a great scholar particularly of Ecclesiology, the study of the Church. He was an advisor to the Vatican and to the American bishops. He was also a deeply spiritual man. In 2001, Pope St. John Paul II named him to the college of cardinals. He passed away in 2008.

Now, here is where I get to name drop. During the 80's and 90's I used to attend a summer institute for priests run by Seton Hall University called the International Institute for Clergy Formation. The Institute attracted some of the greatest scholars in the Catholic Church, including Avery Dulles. The priests could attend one to seven weeks. There were five class periods a day, and three or four scholars each period. We had the ability to choose freely. I always picked a week that Avery Dulles was there so I could attend his lectures. Sometimes he seemed boring, but he wasn't there to entertain. He was there to help us parish priests take our understanding of the faith and our teaching to new levels. He actually knew my name, which I hope was a good thing and not due to my snoring during his lectures. Anyway, I and many of the other priests often thanked him for his book, *Models of the Church*. He told us that he wrote a whole lot of other things too, actually twenty-five books and all sorts of articles and essays, but we would tell him that *Models of the Church* was so easy for our people to follow including, and especially, those who were coming into the Church.

In this book Cardinal Dulles presented models or modes of understanding the Church. He explains that the Church cannot be defined by any one model, but by all models seen together. He presents five models, but notes that there are many other models he could also have explained. The five models he presents begin with the Church as an Institution, the hierarchy, bishops, priests and deacons, and the magisterium, the teaching authority of the Church. His second model is the Church as the people of God emphasizing the vital role of the laity. Many and perhaps most, parishes have ministries led by lay people. His third model is the Church as the union of people with Christ in profound prayer. The Church is where Jesus is united to his people

in the sacraments. This mode or model considers the worship of the Church, the liturgy. Cardinal Dulles' fourth model is the Church as evangelist or herald of the Gospel of Christ. This flows from the directive of the Lord to go out proclaim. Our weekly and daily Masses are called Masses because that word means sending. Every Mass ends with the directive to go and bring the Lord to the world.

Cardinal Dulles' final model is Church as Servant, caring for the presence of Christ in those who reach out for help. The Catholic Church is the most charitable organization in the world. The jewel of the Church in the United States is Catholic Relief Services, the most effective charity in our country. Another wonderful charitable organization is Caritas International. And, as you know, there are many, many more Catholic charities throughout the world. This is the Church as Servant.

At the conclusion of his work, Cardinal Dulles emphasizes that the Church is not just one of these models but all of the models united together as well as many, many more models.

The Church is not just an organization, or a society. The Church is a living being. It is the People of God united by the Holy Spirit into one body, the Body of Christ. It is the Church that unites us. It is through the Church that we make our way to the Kingdom of Heaven. Two weeks ago the Gospel presented Jesus saying to Simon Bar Jonah, "You are Peter, and upon this Rock I will build my Church." This is how Jesus chose to continue His Work on earth, through a church. The Church received its life on Pentecost Sunday. The Holy Spirit is the Life of the Church. That is why Pentecost celebrates the birth of the Church.

Today's Gospel is from Chapter 18 of the *Gospel of Matthew*. This is often called the Dissertation on the Church. It speaks about the responsibilities we have to each other and to the living reality that is the Church. It calls us, as Ezekiel in today's first reading was called, to be sentinels, on the watch for all that can strengthen the People of God, the Church, and all that can weaken the People of God, the Church. The injunctions about the member of the Church who offends others emphasizes that no matter what the offense may be, the mercy of God is present for the sinner if he or she repents. The person who approaches the brother who has sinned is basically saying, "Look, you have gone in the wrong direction. I know you. I know this is not you. You are better than that." The offender is being offered forgiveness and mercy. If he continues to offend or is obstinate in holding on to his sin, then two or three should approach the fellow saying, "We miss you, you belong with us. We need you to be with us. Turn from your ways and know that the mercy of God is there for you." If the person remains obstinate, then perhaps a representative of the entire Church, a deacon, priest or bishop, might help the person understand why his actions are offensive. The priest would say, "This is who we are. This is who you are becoming. You are leaving us. Do not do that. Please." If the person still refuses to receive the mercy and forgiveness of the Church, he would no longer be part of the Church. Still the mercy of God is always available for him in the Church.

We each have to understand our role in the living Church. When we fight against sin, particularly when that fight is against our own sinful inclinations, we are fighting for the Kingdom of God. People will often tell a priest in confession some secret, hidden sins. But these sins are not a secret from God nor are they hidden from the Church. If a person is weakened by sin, he or she is not able to fulfill his or her role in the Church. But the person does not have to stay weak. The Church is a fountain of Mercy and of strength. That is why the Lord provided the Church with the sacrament of penance. In this sacrament Jesus forgives us through the ministry of the Church. Those very words are part of the prayer of absolution, of forgiveness that the priest says over us whenever we go to confession, "through the ministry of the Church may God grant you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." By the way, the priest says, "I absolve you" because the priest is empowered at his ordination to be a mediator for the forgiveness of sins, as well as a mediator to offer the sacrifice of the Lord at Mass.

It is the Church that forgives us in the sacrament of penance. It is the Church that gives us the life of the Lord at baptism. It is the Church that imparts a sharing in Pentecost at confirmation. It is the Church that turns the love of a man and a woman into a sanctuary of love in the sacrament of matrimony. It is the Church that provides us with the Eucharistic Presence of the Lord, strengthening us and nourishing us when we receive communion, being present for us when we pray before the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle or during Eucharistic Adoration.

It is the Church that leads us every year on a journey of growth in faith as we prepare and celebrate the Presence of Jesus as one of us at Advent and Christmas, and as we prepare and celebrate the union of our lives to the death and resurrection of the Lord during Lent and the Easter Season.

It is the Church that is the living body of Christ where two or three are gathered in His Name.

There was an interesting sign posted on a billboard overlooking one of the busiest roads in a very large city. I don't remember if it was New York or Chicago or Los Angeles, but it was one of those. The hope was that the people sitting in their cars during the gridlock would read it and understand it. That sign said, "You are the traffic."

Well, it is the same for us, only in a far more profound way. We don't just belong to the Church. We are the Church.

May the Church, may we, continue to wage the battle for the Kingdom of God.