CHAPTER THREE

THE HISTORICAL STARTING POINT:
ECCLESIOLOGY FROM 1500
TO THE BEGINNING OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

The overarching theme of this chapter can be stated in simple terms: namely, the material presented in chapter three describes the historical development of Christian systematic ecclesiologies. Certain guidelines might help for the interpretation of this historical material.

• Although systematic theology began in the twelfth century, the first appearance of a systematic ecclesiology occurred only in the sixteenth century. From the sixteenth century to the latter part of the twentieth century, individual church denominations, each in its own format, began to establish in their ecclesiologies various key issues which became for their Christian Community dominant, standard, and operative positions. These various ecclesiologies reflected the main tenets of faith as understood in their respective tradition. The sixteenth century origins of systematic ecclesiology provide the *terminus a quo* for this chapter.

• In an individual denomination, a small number of ecclesiological issues were considered as essential and necessary. These essential characteristics provided the foundation on which each denominational church could assert that “their church was truly the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” In the Roman Catholic Church, these fundamental and essential issues were designated as dogmas of faith.

• In the Roman Catholic Church, less central ecclesiological issues were construed in two ways: first, there were designated as “official elements,” that were of great importance but not *de fide catholica*. Liturgical rituals and canonical legislation offer excellent examples of such official but not *de fide catholica* issues. Liturgical rituals can be modified without contradicting matters of faith, and canonical legislation can be rewritten in ways which do not endanger the faith of the church. The second classification of the non-dogmatic ecclesial
matters involves those issues which are clearly seen as theological opinions.¹

- In the Roman Catholic theological world from the sixteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century, some major ecclesiological issues came to be considered as necessary and immutable. Necessity and immutability, however, were at times based on philosophical rather than on theological factors. Thomas Aquinas had accepted a major position of Aristotle,

> Now that which is must needs be when it is, and that which is not must need not be when it is not.²

In the philosophy of Aristotle, the issues of diachronic and synchronic contingency played a major role.³ Through the writings of Thomas Aquinas this philosophical issue became part and parcel of Roman Catholic thought. Synchronic contingency was considered “relativistic,” and therefore unacceptable. Only diachronic contingency was allowed. Most Catholic theologians between the late 1500s and the new millennium followed this dictate of Aristotle, if not in an overt way then in an indirect way. Necessary theological positions were often described as immutable positions.

There are, however, two understandings of immutability. Antonie Vos describes the situation as follows:

> In terms of the history of the ontological theory of immutability there seems to be two distinct ways of handling the concept. Most literature on the subject is only familiar with the one concept of immutability according to which immutability and necessity coincide.⁴

One could elaborate on this first theory of immutability as follows. If \( p \) is necessary, then \( p \) is immutable, and if \( p \) is immutable, then \( p \) is necessary. In this format whatever is essential is considered both necessary and immutable. This view of immutability corresponds

---


