Jean-Marie Tillard
Ecumenical Pioneer and Creative Ecclesiologist

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Introduction

Brian Flanagan never had the opportunity to meet Jean-Marie Tillard in person and learned of him primarily through his writings. Unlike the author, for more than thirty years I spent more time with Jean-Marie Tillard than with any other ecumenical theologian. We worked together in the multilateral conversation of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC), often together in small drafting groups, as well as in the leadership and planning of the Fifth World Conference in Santiago de Compostela with its theme ‘Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness’. We were Vice-Moderators of the Commission together for many years and when I became Moderator, Jean-Marie continued as one of the Vice-Moderators. We were together again during the first five years of ARCIC II (Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission). It was the Jean-Marie that I had worked with for so many years that I immediately recognised in the opening sentences of Flanagan’s Preface where he describes Tillard as ‘an ecumenical pioneer, a prolific theologian, a pastor who shared his knowledge outside academic circles in lectures and talks for people of the Church he loved’. He was ‘a deeply contemplative Christian who wrestled with God and God’s plan for humanity’. And as Flanagan says, even though he had not met Tillard, ‘he was in touch with the humorous in life.’ He was, indeed, a great actor and could hold an audience captive regaling his friends with ecumenical stories, not for publication, late
into the night when, aching with laughter, we begged him to re-tell his stories again and again.

Flanagan is absolutely right when he says that Tillard never gave up on his deep conviction that God’s desire was that ‘humanity be happy through love for God and for each other’. He did indeed rescue an understanding of happiness from a sugary, sentimental concept to one of divine profundity and divine desire.

Flanagan sets out the theme of his book in the Preface and then helps the reader to follow it through the book with introductions to each chapter telling us what lies ahead and ending each chapter with a recapitulation of the argument. Flanagan’s intention is to use Tillard as ‘a case study’ for how to do ecclesiology systematically. The first two chapters sketch out the context in which to set the two central chapters on his ecclesiology. A concluding chapter suggests some ways for improvement and development of Tillard’s own ideas. The whole book is written with clarity, a love of the subject and an admiration for the person who inspired the study.

**Method in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century Theology**

Chapter 1 explores the method used in ecclesiology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and where ecclesiology fits into the overall project of Christian theology. Flanagan describes the change that took place in the mid-nineteenth century from canonical, legal reflection and apologetic scriptural proof-texting, which had been important since the Reformation. While not abandoning the focus on visibility and hierarchical ordering, this became connected in Roman Catholic ecclesiology to questions of the invisible graced reality through the use of metaphors drawn from Scripture such as ‘the Mystical Body of Christ’ or ‘the people of God’. In time the Church as communion became important as a dominant theme. Reference is made to the work of Avery Dulles in his important book on images of the Church. Although Flanagan doesn’t emphasize it, Jean-Marie was always critical of Dulles’ view that *koinonia* could be listed simply as one among many images for the Church. *Koinonia*, for Tillard, could never be described as merely an image. It was Yves Congar’s work that had the greatest influence on Jean Tillard’s understanding of *koinonia*.

At the same time as discussions were continuing among Roman Catholic theologians, the notion of communion became dominant in the work of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC, as well as in statements from assemblies of the Council. The Canberra Statement ‘The Unity of the Church as