
This book offers a passionate plea for a church that actively engages with the challenges of postmodernity. It invites the reader to discover the promises and strengths of a dialogical ecclesiological approach. Against the backdrop of what Mannion calls a ‘neo-exclusivistic’ perspective in recent Roman Catholic official statements on ecclesiology, his book highlights dialogue as intrinsic part of the ecclesial self-understanding today. The reflections in the book are especially geared toward ecclesiological debates within the Roman Catholic communion, but important points of contact with many other traditions and the ecumenical discourse are easily to be found. An important reference point throughout the book is Vatican II and the way in which it gave considerable attention to the challenges in its time. For Mannion, Vatican II with its dialogical openness serves as a touchstone for ecclesiological reflection today. He argues that ‘the call to dialogue in charity perhaps best captures its lasting legacy’ (p. 39).

From the beginning, Mannion’s own standpoint with regard to postmodernity is clear: the plural and polycentric reality of postmodernity is not to be seen as an enemy which needs to be fenced off or countered through authoritarian gestures. Rather, it is to be recognised and celebrated as a space that needs to and can be shaped meaningfully together with others, those within and those outside the church. He argues: ‘Naturally, we must engage in dialogue with the wider societies and the world in general, learning lessons and gathering inspiration for how we might take the church forward’ (p. 24).

The following chapters examine whether the church’s responses to contemporary challenges, in a world described as post-modern, resonate with the call for dialogue from Vatican II. In his analysis of different responses he roughly distinguishes between two ‘ideal types’: the official *communio* understanding of the church, which favours the institutionalised universal church over against the local, and the *concilium* understanding that emphasises the collegiality of local churches with one another. Mannion’s critique of the first comes to the fore in a number of questions, such as: ‘Are we in the midst of such a totalizing drive toward imposed unity despite all the lessons the twentieth century sought to teach us?’ (p. 40). Mannion’s detailed assessment of *Communionis notio*, the ‘official guidance’ of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued in 1992 on the ‘correct’ understanding of the term *communio*, and his critical
analysis of *Dominus Iesus*, released in 2000, shows that there are reasons for raising such questions.

The analysis gets even sharper through the reminder of the positive practical steps that the Roman Catholic Church has indeed already taken in dialogue with other Christians, people of other faiths and people of no faith. In view of this experience and expertise in the church, not only the content of *Dominus Iesus* is critically looked at, but also the method and ways of consultation for such documents.

In the following constructive part of the book ‘the science of bridgebuilding’ is explored. First of all, the approach of *Gaudium et Spes* is commended and serves as basis for all further reflections. Being a pastoral constitution, thus geared toward empowering pastorally and not narrowing down doctrinally, it provides important perspectives until today. ‘*Gaudium et Spes* offers a vision that is primarily concerned with discernment; therefore subsequent generations can learn much from it’ (p. 111). Mannion reiterates that dialogue and charity are key elements in living out the vision of Vatican II. Therefore, he urges the church to develop a concept of ‘authority in dialogue’ and clearly states the need for a pastoral vision and community enhancement.

Mannion identifies several elements that he considers important for an ecclesiological methodology in postmodern times, like epistemic humility, an understanding of true catholicity and commitment to wider ecumenism. He develops his thoughts in conversation with a number of influential and innovative approaches, among them Karl Rahner’s understanding of dialogue in the church, David Tracy’s hermeneutical reflections, and Gregory Baum’s exploration of the wider ecumenism, including interfaith relations. Special attention is given to Roger Haight’s comparative ecclesiology which Mannion considers close to his own approach. An integral part of it is to take the historicity and contextuality of any ecclesiological reflection consciously into account. Furthermore, it advocates acknowledging the existence of different ecclesiologies and entering into sincere discourse with these. For Mannion, the comparative ecclesiological methodology embodies the dialogical approach that he has argued for.

Mannion’s ecclesiological reflections culminate in his proposal for a ‘virtue ecclesiology’, i.e. the understanding of church as ‘virtuous community’. This comes out of his wider research on the interconnectedness of ecclesiology and ethics. He is convinced that virtue ethics can contribute to our understanding of the church, as our ecclesiological reflections need to be concerned not only with the being of the church, but with its doing and its ecclesial practice.