

Congar's Imperfect Critique of "Hierarchiology"

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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL of the Synod of Bishops opened a recent address by stating his hope for the Church:

Yves Congar believed that Catholic ecclesiology over the last two millennia can be divided quite simply into two distinct periods. The first millennium, he said, operated out of what he called a *communio*-ecclesiology; the church of the second millennium, shifted to operating out of a top-down ecclesiology, which Congar summarized as "hierarchology." Today I want to share my hope that, in the wake of Vatican II and its reception by Pope Francis, historians will look back on the church of the *third* millennium as one characterized by an ecclesiology of "synodality."¹

What is this top-down ecclesial *modus operandi* of the second millennium that must sink at last, as the star of synodality rises?

The Dominican theologian Yves Marie-Joseph Congar (1904–1995) is commonly recognized as the most important ecclesiologist in the twentieth century, one whose ideas about the Church repeatedly found expression in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Congar made "hierarchy," a

¹ Mario Cardinal Grech, Secretary-General of the Synod of Bishops, "Sensus Fidei and Consensus in a Synodal Church," 2021 Frank Morrissey address, presented at the Canadian Canon Law Society 55th annual convention, October 25, 2021. As noted below, "hierarchology" and "hierarchiology" are simply variant English spellings of Congar's *hiérarchologie*. I am grateful to Anthony VanBerkum, O.P., for this timely reference.

term apparently coined by Pseudo-Dionysius in the fifth or sixth century,² one of the special objects of his theological focus. In treating it, he ridicules “hierarchiology” (which he means to be a post-thirteenth-century Western reduction of writing on the Church to the clergy), and castigates “Dionysian ideology,” which he discerns in Boniface VIII’s bull of 1302, *Unam Sanctam*.³ For all of Congar’s staggering erudition, fervent faith, and ecumenical spirit, he rarely credits Dionysius as a pillar in the ecclesiologies of both East and West. Instead, when Dionysius is treated, he appears in Congar’s writing as the downfall of medieval ecclesiology.

Recent appreciation for Dionysius shows him to be a Pauline thinker who deftly translates biblical and liturgical realities into neo-Platonic vocabulary.⁴ Dionysius gives us a rather full and impressive treatise on

² See Josef Stiglmayr, “Über die Termini Hierarch und Hierarchia,” *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 22 (1898): 180–87. See also Ronald Hathaway, *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo-Dionysius: A Study in the Form and Meaning of the Pseudo-Dionysian Writings* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1970), xxi: “Pseudo-Dionysius is the virtual author of the term with the lexical meaning which it has possessed since.” Since it is possible that this author of unknown date and origin took the term and its use from some preceding author or school, it is merely probable that Dionysius coined it. Translations of Dionysius here are taken from Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (New York: Paulist, 1987).

³ Since Dionysius never refers to the bishop of Rome, nor features one bishop over other bishops, one can question how Dionysian *Unam Sanctam*’s teaching is. For the historical context and likely sources of the theology of *Unam Sanctam*, see Walter Ullmann, “Boniface VIII and His Contemporary Scholarship,” *The Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 27, no. 1 (1976): 58–87. But Boniface VIII explicitly claimed Dionysius as his authority in the bull’s preparation for the pronouncement that “it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff.” Boniface cited only one non-biblical authority in *Unam Sanctam*: “According to St. Dionysius it is the law of Divinity that the lowest are to be led through the intermediate to the highest [secundum beatum Dionysium, lex divinitatis est, infima per media in suprema reduci]” (*Church and State Through the Centuries: A Collection of Historic Documents with Commentaries*, trans. and ed. Sidney Z. Ehler and John B. Morrall [Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1954], 92). Congar, of course, had a passionate interest in the problematic legacy of *Unam Sanctam*, founding his own ecumenical book series under the same name. See Alberto Melloni, “Congar, Architect of the *Unam Sanctam*,” *Louvain Studies* 29 (2004): 222–38.

⁴ I have in mind theological interpreters such as Andrew Louth, Alexander Golitzin, Maximos Constas, Matthew Levering, and Charles M. Stang. For Dionysius’s pseudonymity as an “ecstatic devotional practice” along the lines of his literary master St. Paul, see Stang, *Apophysis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: “No Longer I”* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Whether or not one accepts Stang’s adventurous thesis about pseudonymity, his deep understanding of Dionysius’s text and context is very useful.

the Church many centuries before the ecclesiological debates sparked by Boniface VIII's pontificate. Rather shortly before the seismic conflict over ecclesiastical and civil power between Pope Boniface and Philip the Fair toward the beginning of the fourteenth century, Thomas Aquinas embraced and adapted Dionysian thinking on hierarchy to defend religious priests in the mendicant controversies of the thirteenth century, and to reveal the sacramental principles of the Church. Close reading of Dionysius and Aquinas reveals a harmony between the two that differs from what Congar describes. It can be shown that Dionysius himself differs from his reception by certain Dionysian thinkers, and develops a faithfully Christian account of the divinization of all through orthodox worship and theology.⁵ It can also be shown that Thomas read Dionysius carefully and followed him more closely than his anti-mendicant adversaries in his understanding of hierarchy, while developing a unique theology of religious perfection through charity and sacramental grace.⁶ Since demonstrating those theses

⁵ He does so in the language of not only the neo-Platonists but also various Christian spiritual traditions, especially Greek and Syrian monasticism. See Dimitrios A. Vasilakis, "On the meaning of hierarchy in Dionysius the Areopagite," in *Platonism and Christian Thought in Late Antiquity*, ed. Panagiotis G. Pavlos, Lars Fredrik Janby, Eyjólfur Kjalar Emilsson, and Torstein Theodor Tollefsen (New York: Routledge, 2019), 181–200; Alexander Golitzin, *Mystagogy: A Monastic Reading of Dionysius Areopagita*, ed. Bogdan G. Bucur (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2013). Golitzin contends that Dionysius is a Greek-speaking Christian theologian, well acquainted with the Syrian ascetical tradition (*Mystagogy*, especially xxxiii–58). His interpretation of Dionysius is sometimes called the "liturgical reading" (Vasilakis, "Meaning of hierarchy," 187).

⁶ Thomas develops his theology of the religious life, making use of the *Celestial Hierarchy* [CH] and *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* [EH] of Dionysius and responding to criticisms on the basis of his Epistle 8, throughout the two phases of the mendicant controversy at Paris, especially in his *Contra impugnantes dei cultum et religionem*, *De perfectione spiritualis vitae*, and *Summa theologiae* [ST] II-II, qq. 171–89. See the work of Michel-Marie Dufeil, for example, "Ierarchia: un concept dans la polémique universitaire parisienne du xiiième siècle," in *Soziale ordnungen im selbstverständnis des Mittelalters*, ed. Albert Zimmermann, *Miscellanea Mediaevalia* 12/1 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979), 56–83; Andrew Hofer, O.P., "Aquinas's Use of Patristic Sources in His Theology of Religious Life," in *Reading the Church Fathers with Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Piotr Roszak and Jörgen Vijgen, *Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes, Sciences Religieuses* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 295–338; Mary C. Sommers, "Defense and Discovery: Brother Thomas' *Contra impugnantes*," in *Laudemus viros gloriosos: Essays in Honor of Armand Maurer, CSB*, ed. R. E. Houser (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 184–208; David E. Luscombe, "Thomas Aquinas and Conceptions of Hierarchy in the Thirteenth Century," in *Thomas von Aquin: Werk und Wirkung im Licht neuerer Forschungen*, *Miscellanea Mediaevalia* 19 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), 261–77; and, most recently, Christian Raab, O.S.B., *Understanding*

would entail two larger projects, I will not attempt to do so here. Rather, I will summarize Congar's influential account of hierarchy as "hierarchyology" and propose a revision to his Thomistic ecclesiology.

I will isolate my study of Congar to six texts which span several decades.⁷

the Religious Priesthood: History, Controversy, Theology (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2020). Bernhard Blankenhorn, O.P., gives a very useful account of Thomas's theology of grace and charity in comparison with Dionysius and Albert the Great, in *The Mystery of Union with God: Dionysian Mysticism in Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 285–91, arguing that "the relative primacy of love in union with God distinguishes Aquinas's mysticism from the Areopagite's more intellect-centered approach, even though Thomas remains far from so-called Affective Dionysianism" (288). The latter phrase refers especially to the Bonaventurian-Franciscan interpretation of Dionysius, which was influenced by Thomas Gallus's commentary: see Dufeil, "Ierarchia," 65–66. According to Boyd Taylor Coolman, this Victorine affective way, "following Hugh but departing from Dionysius, champions love (*amor, dilectio, affectio*) over knowledge in the pursuit of union with God . . . [and] both reflects and effects profound shifts in the history of western theology, the reverberations of which continue to be felt" ("The Medieval Affective Dionysian Tradition," *Modern Theology* 24, no. 4 [2008]: 615–32, at 615). See also Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200–1350)*, vol. 3 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1998), 78–136, as well as Coolman's and McGinn's entries in *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, eds. Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 121–58 ("Thomas Gallus") and 190–209 ("Late Medieval Mystics"), respectively. Regarding this matter in relation to the idea of hierarchy, Coolman describes an important passage in Gallus's commentary "where the charge of anti-intellectualism emerges," in which the human soul, ascending through nine ranks of "angelization," culminates its journey in an *apex affectionis*, in which *scientia* is cut off (145).

- ⁷ The volume of Congar's work makes it difficult to give universal characterizations, or to identify shifts over time. Speaking of Congar's theology in general, though in the context of his theology of the local and universal Church, Christopher Ruddy judges that Congar's thought before and after the Second Vatican Council, "while evolving as is natural after an event of such magnitude, remained in deep, fundamental continuity with his earlier efforts; its development is largely organic and the differences are ones of degree, not of kind" (*The Local Church: Tillard and the Future of Catholic Ecclesiology* [New York: Herder & Herder, 2006], 39). For an overview of Congar's ecclesiology (which contains little discussion of hierarchy), see Timothy I. MacDonald, *The Ecclesiology of Yves Congar: Foundational Themes* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984). MacDonald argues that "the fundamental principle which is the mainstay of his entire ecclesiology . . . is the dialectic of structure and life," and refers the critique of hierarchyology to this principle (88–89). Congar contributed a brief foreword to this dissertation (xxii–xxiii), demurring slightly from MacDonald's thesis about structure and life, and attributing his dialectical approach to the Church to an early "discovery

The earliest and latest of them are dedicated to expressing Thomas Aquinas's theology of the Church, and serve as bookends to this discussion. The earlier is important for having been published numerous times, and giving a broad programmatic statement of Congar's Thomistic idea of the Church.⁸ This 1939 essay, "L'idée de l'Église chez saint Thomas d'Aquin" (text 1), may be paired with Congar's 1978 essay "Vision de l'Église chez Thomas d'Aquin" (text 6).⁹

Congar's long 1961 essay "Aspects ecclésiologiques de la querelle entre mendiants et séculiers dans la seconde moitié du XIIIe siècle et le début du XIVe" (text 2)¹⁰ is the most decisive for the question of Dionysian hierarchy, and its influence is felt in any subsequent writing on Thomas and the mendicant controversies. However, other works anticipate, corroborate, and elaborate the ideas expressed in "Aspects ecclésiologiques." Congar's 1953 book *Jalons pour une théologie du laïc* (text 3) contains a critique of "hierarchiology" and situates it within his important project of formulating a "theology of the laity."¹¹ A 1962 collection of essays edited by

of eschatology," which supplemented "what was most lacking in the Roman documents and in Roman theologians with their juridical point of view."

⁸ I use the words "Thomist" and "Thomistic" generically. Congar might be said to oppose "Thomism," or *l'école thomiste*, as a more historical expositor of Thomas working against Scholastic Thomistic presentations which he considered inauthentic to the spirit of Aquinas's theology. I leave aside such dichotomies and call Congar a "Thomist" simply in the sense of a theologian writing about and influenced by Thomas Aquinas. On this matter, with reference to Congar's theology of the Church, see Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., "Yves Congar et l'ecclésiologie de Saint Thomas d'Aquin," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 82, no. 2 (1998): 201–42. This controversy continues in the francophone *Thomasien* world.

⁹ "L'idée de l'Église" is the French text of Congar's 1939 address to the Aquinas Society of London, published in English as "The Idea of the Church in St. Thomas Aquinas," *The Thomist* 1 (1939): 331–59. It appeared later in French in the *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 29 (1940): 31–58, and was reprinted in the eighth volume of the series *Unam Sanctam, Esquisses du Mystère de l'Église* (Paris: Cerf, 1953), 59–91. (For polemical comments bearing on Congar's founding of *Unam Sanctam*, see Melloni, "Congar, Architect of the *Unam Sanctam*"). "Vision de l'Église" was published in *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 62 (1978): 523–41, and can also be found in Yves Congar, *Thomas d'Aquin: sa vision de théologie et de l'Église* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984), as the sixth reprinted article. Please note that all translations presented from non-English titles (unaccompanied by corresponding locations in published translation titles) are my own.

¹⁰ Yves Congar, "Aspects ecclésiologiques de la querelle entre mendiants et séculiers dans la seconde moitié du XIIIe siècle et le début du XIVe," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 28 (1961): 35–151.

¹¹ Yves Congar, *Jalons pour une théologie du laïc* (Paris: Cerf, 1953) (see xxxii: "the

Congar and Bernard Dupuy contains two pertinent essays by Congar: “La hiérarchie comme service selon le nouveau testament et les documents de la tradition” (text 4)¹² and “De la communion des églises à une ecclésiologie de l’Église universelle” (text 5),¹³ which show some of his influential thinking on the eve of the Second Vatican Council and add important detail to his critique of the ecclesiology of preceding eras.

Congar gives a caricature of Dionysian ecclesiology as generally modeled on the angels, but does not give evidence of knowing the fundamentally sacramental structure of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (EH).¹⁴ This Dominican, who perhaps rivals his brother Thomas in theological influence today, defines Dionysian ecclesiology through a certain Franciscan interpretation, and argues that Thomas’s ecclesiology cannot be significantly influenced by Dionysius. Here I will present Congar’s critique in my first section, and his own attempt to salvage hierarchy from the distortions of Dionysian theology in the second. In response, I will then, in a final third section, suggest how a better understanding of Dionysius would help, not hinder, this rehabilitation of ecclesiastical hierarchy.

preparation of the book having been spread over two years”). Published in English as *Lay People in the Church*, trans. Donald Attwater (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1965). The translation uses the word “hierarchology” at 39, whereas Congar writes “hiérarchiologie.” The alternate spelling occurs sometimes in related English-language literature, e.g., Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, expanded ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 28.

¹² “La hiérarchie comme service” appears in *L’Épiscopat et l’Église universelle*, ed. Yves Congar and Bernard Dupuy (Paris: Cerf, 1962), 67–99. It was later expanded and published in *Pour une Église servante et pauvre* (Paris: Cerf, 1963). The latter volume was then published in English as *Power and Poverty in the Church*, trans. Jennifer Nicholson (Baltimore: Helicon, 1964).

¹³ “La communion des églises” appears in *L’Épiscopat et l’Église universelle*, 227–60.

¹⁴ The EH is largely a discussion of Christian rites, with painstaking explanations of their signification and the divine power at work in them. Dionysius adopts the pagan concept of “theurgy,” but applies the term principally to the one Theurgist, Christ. See Panagiotis G. Pavlos, “Theurgy in Dionysius the Areopagite,” in Pavlos, Janby, Kjalal, and Tollefsen, *Platonism and Christian Thought*, 151–77, at 152: “He asserts that the provider of the theurgic mysteries (θεουργὰ μυστήρια) is Christ Himself. . . . Thus, for the Areopagite, theurgy is not an art depending for its efficacy on the similarities of the sensible world to the world of the gods, but a novel historical event associated with God’s physical presence in the world and a certain new theandric activity.” Christ’s human actions establish the chief rank of the ecclesial hierarchy: the sacraments of baptism (“illumination” or “divine birth”), Eucharist (“synaxis” or “communion”), and confirmation (“ointment” or “myron”), see EH 2–4.

Hierarchiology as "Dionysian Ideology"

Just as Dionysius may have coined "hierarchy," so Congar seems to have coined the term "hierarchiology." He uses it several times as a caricature of ecclesiology that fails to see beyond clerics to the full human scope of the Church. This is especially important in his attempt to promote lay participation and understanding in the Church:

If theology *De ecclesia* be practically reduced to a "hierarchiology" or, more generally, be made a theology only of the Church's structure, without reference to her life, there is a risk of the laity being regarded as simply an accident, an appendage of the Church, at most necessary to her *bene esse*.¹⁵

Offering a simile of growth and harvest, where the laity and hierarchy are together represented by the fruition of an ear of corn, while the provisional hierarchical mediation of divine gifts is the stalk that supports the ear but will ultimately be destroyed, Congar writes:

In this way then are their respective parts allotted so that the hierarchy and the faithful may form one Church and carry out her mission to the full. The hierarchy is a means by which Christ's specific and properly divine life is brought to the stalk of the corn; through the faithful, the measure of Christ comes to the teeming substance of mankind and the world. The resuming of everything in Christ is realised by the two together.¹⁶

Congar acknowledges the need for hierarchical mediation, but emphasizes its temporary nature. He places "hierarchy and faithful" together under the eternal rule of Christ.

He promises an account of lay activity in the Church as participation by the grace of Christ in the cosmic fulfillment of humanity: "A complete theology of the laity will be a total ecclesiology: it will also be an anthropology, and even a theology of the creation in its relation to Christology."¹⁷ But in this context, hierarchy appears as a shadow cast over the promise of a "total ecclesiology." A sprawling footnote in *Jalons* laments that "there is

¹⁵ Congar, *Lay People*, 45 (trans. altered); *Jalons pour une théologie*, 74.

¹⁶ Congar, *Lay People*, 111; *Jalons pour une théologie*, 158.

¹⁷ Congar, *Lay People*, xxxiii; *Jalons pour une théologie*, 14.

a certain number of twelfth to sixteenth century texts wherein the word Church is used to mean hierarchy.”¹⁸ By 1961, Congar applies a range of terms to the ecclesiology focused on hierarchy: besides *hiérarchiologie*, there are *hiérarchisme*¹⁹ and *l'idéologie hiérarchique de Denys*,²⁰ among others. In the genealogical question of hierarchy, Congar suspects that its scion in the thirteenth century is St. Bonaventure.

The disputes over the mendicant orders, according to Congar, thoroughly determined the early systematic treatment of the Church:

The friars could only justify their ministry by means of a mission and jurisdiction received from the Pope, and by a theology of his universal and immediate authority, surpassing all local structures. Now, the friars intervened in theological activity in a massive and decisive fashion and, regarding ecclesiology, at the moment that it was at the point of being constituted as a proper and separate treatise.²¹

The position of the mendicants indeed required a strong defense of the pope’s “universal and immediate authority.” For Congar, this gives thirteenth-century ecclesiology a slant not only toward “hierarchy,” but also toward overstating the power and authority of the pope

St. Bonaventure’s theology of hierarchy, which I will not discuss here in depth, differs from Thomas’s most significantly with respect to the Trinity. Bonaventure affirms, in addition to the celestial and sub-celestial hierarchies, a “super-celestial” hierarchy of divine persons.²² The hierarchical God marks every creature hierarchically, especially the Church. Congar

¹⁸ Congar, *Lay People*, 42n22; *Jalons pour une théologie*, 71n40.

¹⁹ Congar, “Aspects ecclésiologiques,” 129.

²⁰ Congar, “Aspects ecclésiologiques,” 123.

²¹ Congar, “Aspects ecclésiologiques,” 99.

²² Congar, “Aspects ecclésiologiques,” 109; see Bonaventure, *Collationes in hexaemeron* 2.16, in *S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia* V, ed. studio et cura PP. Collegii S. Bonaventura (Florence: Quaracchi, 1891), 339. See also Bonaventure, *In II sent.*, comm. in d. 9, praenot.: “Hugh [of St. Victor] uses these terms: celestial, super-celestial, and sub-celestial hierarchies. Some say they are improper designations, but this is false, because in each there is a sacred primacy [principatus]” (*Opera Omnia* II, 238). This point traces to Bonaventure’s reliance on the Victorine interpretation of Dionysius. See *Conferences on the Six Days of Creation: The Illuminations of the Church*, trans. Jay M. Hammond, Bonaventure Texts in Translation 18 (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2018), 100, where Hammond notes: “On this point, Hugh and Bonaventure disagree with the Dionysian tradition by extending the notion of hierarchy to divinity itself.”

writes: "The ecclesiology or hierarchiology of St. Bonaventure shows that it is profoundly a 'theo'-logy. The hierarchical order, of which Dionysius is the *doctor*, is trinitarian."²³ The universal conception of hierarchy in Bonaventure makes him, in Congar's judgment, "perhaps one of the most authentically Dionysian [thinkers] that one finds in the West," for he "uses Aristotle and Averroes in a Dionysian spirit."²⁴

Congar charts the "Dionysian synthesis" in Bonaventure and his contemporaries and followers, such as the Franciscan Thomas of York, through the Augustinian Giles of Rome, to the ecclesiological watershed of Pope Boniface VIII's *Unam Sanctam*:

It is incontestably with St. Bonaventure and Thomas of York that the Dionysian synthesis best preserves its fullness and value as a total construction of the world and the Church.²⁵

Giles [of Rome] draws, from Dionysian principles, certain hierocratic conclusions. . . . [This work is] very surely, as to this theologico-political Dionysian metaphysics, a direct inspiration of the bull *Unam Sanctam*.²⁶

Ideologically, Giles sets in motion the Dionysian construction of a scaled [*échelonnée*] hierarchy: he applies ecclesologically some ideal of a "reduction" to the Sovereign Pontiff. . . . Once more, there is a pyramidal construction, à la [French revolutionary theorist] Siéyès, more chimerical than real.²⁷

The appeal to Dionysian themes, dear to Franciscan theologians, prepared the formulas of the bull *Unam Sanctam*.²⁸

The "Dionysian synthesis" seems to mean essentially that the earthly Church mirrors the heavenly. Thomas is also guilty, in Congar's eyes, of

²³ Congar, "Aspects ecclésiologiques," 113.

²⁴ Congar, "Aspects ecclésiologiques," 111. Congar's judgments about Aristotle in this essay are rather diverse and unexplained. He ascribes both the monarchical quality of thirteenth-century ecclesiology (103–4) and Aquinas's "anthropologically conditioned" independence from Plotinian emanative theories of man and society to the use of Aristotle.

²⁵ Congar, "Aspects ecclésiologiques," 138.

²⁶ Congar, "Aspects," 140. Here he cites the "very nuanced proof" of this influence in Jean Rivière, *Le Problème de l'Église et de l'État au temps de Philippe le Bel* (Paris: E. Champion, 1926), 394–404. On the importance of Giles of Rome in the composition of *Unam Sanctam*, see Ullmann, "Boniface VIII," 75–79.

²⁷ Congar, "Aspects ecclésiologiques," 141.

²⁸ Congar, "Aspects ecclésiologiques," 149.

espousing this aspect of Dionysian ideology: "The doctrine, on this point, is the same; the tone is different."²⁹

However, Thomas's version of this shared thirteenth-century "hierarchy" provides a seedbed for Congar's alternative vision. Yes, the Church is governed by a hierarchy of clerics, but Thomas "equally sets in motion the idea of the visible representation and ministry of Christ's government of the universal Church, as he exists in it by his sanctifying action in sacramental ministry."³⁰ Congar proposes competing versions of neo-Platonist *exitus-reditus* at work in his contrast between Bonaventure and Aquinas. Bonaventure espouses that of Dionysius and, through him, of Plotinus. This emanation of the One results in an idealized, universal structure, mediated through the pope. This leads directly, in Congar's mind, to Boniface VIII's claim that submission to him is absolutely necessary for salvation.

Congar maintains this argument regarding the papacy in other important texts. "Aspects ecclésiologiques" was published in 1961. The following year, Congar published "La hiérarchie comme service" as part of a volume of the series *Unam Sanctam* composed as an aid to the work of the Second Vatican Council.³¹ He would make it more widely available in 1963, adding a paper given in 1961 at the Abbey of Bec as a chapter within "La hiérarchie comme service," under the heading "Destin historique." Congar says himself, in the preface to the later edition, that this work on hierarchy "was well-received and aroused considerable response," noting a "widely quoted" address of Pope John XXIII which bears the mark of Congar's influence.³²

We find in the second version another appearance of the word "hierarchy." Congar says that, in the post-Tridentine Church, "ecclesiology,

²⁹ Congar, "Aspects ecclésiologiques," 105.

³⁰ Congar, "Aspects ecclésiologiques," 105.

³¹ Congar, *L'Épiscopat et l'Église universelle*. See Ruddy, *Local Church*, 40: "[Congar] helped to organize several preparatory and exploratory studies, for example, *L'Épiscopat et l'Église universelle*. . . . Immediately after the council he set to work on *Unam Sanctam*'s commentary on the conciliar documents, ultimately releasing over twenty volumes—and thereby justly earning the title of 'the theologian of Vatican II par excellence.'" The last statement is from Etienne Fouilloux, "Frère Yves, Cardinal Congar, Dominicain: Itinéraire d'un théologien," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 79 (1995): 400.

³² Congar, *Pour une Église*, 9; *Power and Poverty*, 11. He does not take credit for the pope's words here, but Congar enjoys the reputation of wielding major influence upon the pope and the Church just before Vatican II. It is reported that Angelo Roncalli, who would become Pope John XXIII, read Congar's *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Église* (1950) and asked: "A reform of the Church, is it possible?" See Jean Puyo, *Une vie pour la vérité: Jean Puyo interroge le Père Congar* (Paris: Centurion, 1975), 117, cited in Ruddy, *Local Church*, 178.

as far as the instruction of clerics and of the faithful is concerned, became fixed in a set pattern in which the question of authority is so predominant that the whole treatise is more like a hierarchiology or a treatise on public law."³³ He goes on here to describe the Western Church's exaggerated focus on papal authority, saying that authority in the Church seems "first and foremost the idea and exercise of papal authority. The pope is really *episcopus universalis*."³⁴

This is a serious accusation of an ecclesiological error leveled at mendicant friars like Thomas Aquinas by anti-mendicant theologians like William of Saint-Amour. Thomas is careful to avoid the term "universal bishop" in his defense of papal authority, acknowledging the authority of canon law and, ultimately, Gregory the Great.³⁵ So what does Congar

³³ Congar, *Pour une Église*, 62; *Power and Poverty*, 70.

³⁴ Congar, *Pour une Église*, 62: "Le pape est vraiment *episcopus universalis*"; *Power and Poverty*, 70. While his tone is ambiguous here, this "vraiment" seems to be sarcastic. Congar, in a diary entry on October 29, 1964 criticizes Michael Browne, former master of the Order of Preachers (1955–1962) and then Cardinal, for holding that the pope is *episcopus universalis*; see *Mon Journal du Concile*, vol. 2, ed. Éric Mahieu (Paris: Cerf, 2002), 233.

³⁵ The mendicants, because of their appeals to the papal institution of their orders, were accused of calling the pope the *episcopus universalis*, or "universal bishop." The anti-mendicant masters (as Thomas formulates their complaint in an objection) admitted the pope's universal governance, but appealed to Gratian's *Decretum*, dist. 89, which prohibited the use of the term "universal bishop" for the pope (Gratian, *Decretum*, p. 1, dist. 99, ch. 5, in *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, col. 351; Aquinas mistakenly cites dist. 89). Thomas explains that the title is denied to the pope "not because he does not possess complete and direct power over every diocese in the Church, but because he does not rule any particular diocese as its peculiar and special pastor. Were he to do so, the powers of the other bishops would lapse" (*Contra impugnantes*, ch. 4; Leonine ed. 41A:82, [Ins.1242–49]). This objection, enshrined by Gratian, derived ultimately from Gregory the Great, who rejected "universal bishop" as a term used by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. The *Decretum*, dist. 99, citation is from Gregory's letter of June 1, 595, to Eulogius, Patriarch of Alexandria, and Anastasius of Antioch, referring to John IV of Constantinople's use of the title; see *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, trans. John R. C. Martyn, vol. 2 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2004), 359–63. For context, see George E. Demacopoulos, "Gregory the Great and the Sixth-Century Dispute over the Ecumenical Title," *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 600–621. Gregory's judgment against the title rests not only on a translation of οἰκουμενικός into Latin as *universalis*, but also on Gregory's own moral theology of pride and pastoral rule. Demacopoulos writes: "Key to understanding Gregory's stated rejection of the title is the fact that he, like the Latin translators of Justinian's *Novellae*, took the Greek word οἰκουμενικός to mean 'universal'—*universalis* in Latin. According to Gregory, this meant that John was proclaiming that he was, in effect, the 'only bishop,' implying that all other bishops received their authority through him. Gregory

intend by this troubling description of *episcopus universalis*? It seems that he means to point out an unhealthy tendency by exaggerating it sarcastically. The choice is unfortunate, and it is parroted by several of Congar's followers.³⁶

A second essay in the same volume of *Unam Sanctam* elaborates the argument. "La communion des églises" continues Congar's historical reflection on the development of hierarchy. This historical presentation is engineered to inspire new thinking about the episcopacy. Here again, Congar will attribute a Dionysian character to the problematic idea of the pope as universal bishop.

Congar depicts the early belief and practice of the Church as a communion founded on the fellowship of bishops among themselves:

The identity of the faith professed and the sacraments celebrated, among relatively autonomous local communities, is precisely what establishes communion. This is expressed in gestures of solidarity among Christians, among churches, among the bishops who represent or personify these churches: communion of churches occurs in the communion of bishops.³⁷

Congar does not contrast this notion of the Church with Dionysius's overtly, but in light of the direction he will take, it is worth noting that Dionysius's ecclesiology does not contradict this description. While Dionysius does not focus on the communion among bishops (hierarchs), so much as their vertical mediatory role with regard to their inferiors, he seems to take communion among bishops for granted. This is apparent, for example, in the instructional nature of his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, written to Timothy, from whom Dionysius "exact[s] a promise to deal in purity with what is pure and to share the divine operations only with men of God, to share perfection only with those who actually are perfected."³⁸ And, again, the *Corpus Dionysiacum* makes no mention of a pope.

fundamentally opposed that claim, not just for the bishop of Constantinople but for any bishop, including the bishop of Rome" (608).

³⁶ See, e.g., R. Kevin Seasoltz, *A Virtuous Church: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Liturgy for the 21st Century* (New York: Orbis, 2012), 123, where Seasoltz repeats the term "hierarchyology," and paraphrases Congar's narrative from this text: "The pope became the universal bishop." See also Ormond Rush, *The Vision of Vatican II: Its Fundamental Principles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2019), which includes a section entitled, "Overcoming 'Hierarchyology'" and cites this Congar passage at length.

³⁷ Congar, "La communion des églises," 232.

³⁸ *EH* 5.1.5.377B. When Dionysius says, on the other hand, "Talk of 'hierarch' and one

Congar then singles out the eleventh century as a period of juridical and theological centralization under the pope, using familiar terms:

Under the pen of Leo IX, often held by Humbert of Moyen-mouthier [a.k.a., Humbert de Silva Candida, notorious for his actions in 1054], and under that of Gregory VII, there abound formulas of an ecclesiology of the Church conceived as one unique society submitted under the authority of the pope. The pope is the universal bishop.³⁹

This characterization has the same problematic ambiguity as we saw in *Pour une Église servante et pauvre* (in which "La hiérarchie comme service" was reprinted a year after its 1962 reprinting in *L'Épiscopat et l'Église universelle*).⁴⁰ Does Congar mean that the Western Church has simply forgotten how to reject, with St. Gregory the Great, the idea of a "universal bishop"? We find here as well a historical narrative that traces thirteenth-century developments to a neo-Platonist "reduction to the One." Congar says that, among medieval authors,

ecclesiology immediately entails the affirmation of the universal jurisdiction of the pope, for the unity of a plurality supposes a principle of reduction to unity, and thus an authority. This idea, with its rigorous entanglement of social unity with the unity of a leader, is extremely strong in the Middle Ages.⁴¹

Thomas is part of this, yet Congar absolves him: "Decidedly, St. Thomas Aquinas insists on the authority of bishops. . . . He is without a doubt the closest to the ecclesiological positions of the secular Masters."⁴² But Thomas's moderate position on the relationship of bishop and pope flows from his sensitivity to various sources, including both Church law and Dionysian theology.⁴³

is referring to a holy and inspired man . . . someone in whom an entire hierarchy is completely perfected and known" (*EH* 5.1.3.373C), he seems to mean that a "relatively autonomous local community," in Congar's terms, is perfected in its bishop.

³⁹ Congar, "La communion des églises," 238.

⁴⁰ See note 11 above.

⁴¹ Congar, "La communion des églises," 245.

⁴² Congar, "La communion des églises," 246–47.

⁴³ See especially Thomas's use of Dionysius in his *Contra impugnantes*, ch. 2, where Aquinas attributes his opponents' misunderstanding of relations in the Church to "a bad understanding of Dionysius." The numbering within this work is confused among

Yet Congar's comments again suggest that the theological model in which power and authority flow from pope to bishops is "Dionysian":

Bonaventure . . . proposes a justification of the supreme power of the pope by having recourse to the Dionysian metaphysics of unity . . . [like] Matthew of Acquasparta, one of the advisors of Boniface VIII for the bull *Unam Sanctam* (Nov. 18, 1302), in which is found a revival of the Dionysian ideology.⁴⁴

It is through recourse to Dionysius that Thomas consistently upholds the idea of episcopal perfection, and even maintains what Gilles Emery considers a point of contact with the Eastern ecclesiological tradition.⁴⁵ Yet Congar insists that Thomas is less Dionysian than those who simply use the "metaphysics of unity" to discuss the pope. Clearly, this *use* of Dionysius constitutes an "ideology" leading to "hierarchyology" and, in Congar's judgment, must be corrected.

Congar does believe that it is necessary to defend papal primacy. He thinks that this must be done in the idiom of communion: "The ecclesiology of pontifical power, as 'episcopal' power qualitatively superior to the ensemble of Churches and of the faithful, ought to be expressed in union with a theology of communion."⁴⁶ Communion in the Mystical Body is, for Congar, an expression that combines universality and sacramental grace in a way that transcends the otherwise perfect unity of the local Church.⁴⁷

various translations and editions, so one should follow the Leonine ed., 41A:61 (lines 568–69): "Procedit etiam eorum ratio ex malo intellectu Dionysii." Please note that Hofer, "Aquinas's Use," 296n2, clarifies the ways in which what *corpusthomisticum.org* states as the Leonine edition here (the version it presents in its *opera omnia* of Thomas for this work) differs from the actual Leonine edition.

⁴⁴ Congar, "La communion des églises," 247.

⁴⁵ The "distinction of *ordo* is limited to the relation of the bishop to the mystical Body of Christ that is the Church"; by this limitation, "St. Thomas perceived here an important aspect of patristic and Eastern ecclesiology" (Gilles Emery, "A Note on St. Thomas and the Eastern Fathers," trans. Jennifer Harms and John Baptist Ku, in *Trinity, Church, and the Human Person: Thomistic Essays* [Naples, FL: Sapientia, 2007], 197n16).

⁴⁶ Congar, "La communion des églises," 260.

⁴⁷ Congar, "La communion des églises," 252. Here Congar raises Thomas as an example of privileging Eucharistic communion, and pointing out repeatedly (with references to *Contra impugnantes* and *De perfectione*) that the pope has no greater power to consecrate the Eucharist than a bishop, or even his priest. For Congar as a theologian of communion, set helpfully within the context of "Communio" ecclesiology, see Dennis M. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology: Visions and Versions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 38–55. Doyle's chapter compares Congar with Charles Cardinal Journet, as two

Congar regrets that Thomas is partially entangled in the "hierarchism" of his milieu. However, he argues that Thomas's alternative formulations of the Church amount to a rejection of "Dionysian hierarchism":

Dionysian hierarchies interpose certain insurmountable intermediaries between God himself and men. St. Thomas evidently does not admit this hierarchism: God himself, immediately attained in himself, is the term of man's full *reditus*. The Dionysian position, later that of Gregory Palamas, who found a point of departure in the precedent, would not be, for St. Thomas, the formula for a full and true divinization. But, beneath this essential question, it is the whole Dionysian hierarchism, with its intermediaries, which is involved. It is ultimately the Plotinian metaphysics of the One, assumed by Dionysius, and rejected by St. Thomas.⁴⁸

For Congar, it is thanks to Thomas's biblical accuracy, and his Aristotelian realism, that Thomas detaches himself from the Dionysian ecclesiastical hierarchy modeled on the angels:

St. Thomas evidently owes much to Dionysius. . . . But his ecclesiology appears to us little influenced by Dionysius in its deep lines. It is too Christological, too soteriological, too anthropologically conditioned, to be truly attached to an angelic and celestial model. Too realist, also, too carefully elaborated upon New Testament texts and upon the facts. Finally, too tied to Aristotelian inspirations regarding causality and the conditions of man and society.⁴⁹

It is clear that Congar has some familiarity with Dionysius's own writings, and occasionally mentions them. However, this argument is, in his own words, expressly about "the usage made of Pseudo-Dionysius by different authors" of the thirteenth century.⁵⁰ He evidently wants to blame the result of *Unam Sanctam* on the "Dionysian ideology" of Bonaventure and the subsequent tradition of "hierarchiology," which Thomas "rejected."

A ballooning of the rhetoric against "hierarchiology" is a notable part

different Thomistic precursors to communion ecclesiology.

⁴⁸ Congar, "Aspects ecclésiologiques," 129. Congar, in "La hiérarchie comme service," 76, contrasts "the God of Plotinus," who is "the One who loves himself," with Jesus Christ, who leans down to us in grace.

⁴⁹ Congar, "Aspects ecclésiologiques," 132.

⁵⁰ Congar, "Aspects ecclésiologiques," 114.

of Congar's legacy. One recent theologian praises Congar, saying that "his greatest influence of all was in helping to bring about the ecclesiological transformation brought about by Vatican II that was deemed most essential to the overcoming of the dominance of hierarchichalism and of hierarchiology."⁵¹ Another, not preserving Congar's historiographical subtlety, calls hierarchiology "a theology that exalts the hierarchy and belittles the laity."⁵² Congar exculpates Thomas Aquinas from his indictment of thirteenth-century ecclesiology only by distancing him from Dionysius, and attributes both "hierarchiology" and the (mis)understanding of the pope as universal bishop to a "Dionysian ideology" stemming from Bonaventure.

Hierarchy Rehabilitated

But Congar wanted to save hierarchy from hierarchiology. Like St. Thomas, Congar was a Catholic and Dominican *doctor*, loyal to the Church and intent on explaining its essential features in a theologically sound way. Since "mendicants are men of a world that changes,"⁵³ he wished to produce a theology adequate to the Church in his time. In his early synthesis of Thomas's thought on the Church, "L'idée de l'Église," Congar laid down themes that would structure his ecclesiology for decades, and affect the way he characterized Thomas on hierarchy. It began as a conference in English, and was published numerous times in both English and French.⁵⁴ Congar claims that all that he says about Thomas "is equally true of St. Bonaventure, Alexander of Hales, Albert the Great and the other

⁵¹ Gerard Mannion, "Beyond Hierarchiology: Congar, Pope Francis and the Council's Unfinished Liberation of Ecclesiology," in *The Promise of Renewal: Dominicans and Vatican II*, ed. Michael Attridge, Darren Dias, Matthew Eaton, and Nicholas Olkovich (Adelaide, South Australia: ATF Theology, 2017), 47–73, at 62.

⁵² Richard J. Beauchesne, "Heeding the Early Congar Today, and Two Recent Roman Catholic Issues: Seeking Hope on the Road Back," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 27, no. 3 (1990): 536.

⁵³ Congar, "Aspects ecclésiologiques," 147.

⁵⁴ It also exists in the English volume *The Mystery of Church: Studies by Yves Congar* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1965), which notes a first English "version" by A. V. Littledale published in 1960, *Mystery* being a 1965 "revised translation." This edition omits many footnotes, "especially those likely to be of little interest to readers whose inquiry and capacity does not extend beyond the English language" (vii). It is here that Congar describes "L'idée de l'Église" as "a synthesis, rather than an exposition, of the Thomist theology *De Ecclesia*" (ix). This shows how the essay, republished over four decades, eventually reached, or aimed to reach, a wide readership.

scholastics of that epoch," in other words, before the conflict between Philip the Fair and Pope Boniface VIII caused ecclesiological works to focus on papal and royal power.⁵⁵ But he understates the Thomistic quality of his account: this essay certainly provides a wealth of theological thought specific to Aquinas, not a general ecclesiological profile of the thirteenth century. Moreover, we have already seen how important the contrast between Thomas and Bonaventure in their thinking about hierarchy becomes for Congar.

Congar argues that Aquinas's ecclesiology is latent, not only in his understanding of the grace of Christ,⁵⁶ but also in his moral theology, adverting to the structure of the *Summa theologiae*. In what will become a thematic idea for Congar, he attributes the lack of a treatise specifically dedicated to the Church to the fact that, for Thomas, "the Church is not a separate reality, something outside the Christian-Trinitarian mystery, outside the anthropologic, christologic, sacramental thing which is the subject of theology."⁵⁷ The order of Congar's presentation puts the Holy Spirit first, as the principle of life in the Church, corresponding to the theological virtues in the individual Christian soul.⁵⁸ This is, in part, to show that Thomas's idea of the Church is "theocentric," before it is "christocentric"—Christ is indeed central, but not methodologically so, in determining a Thomist ecclesiology.⁵⁹ Thomas's conception of faith, hope, and love is theocentric, these virtues having God himself as their formal object. The Church "is one because, by faith, hope, and love, all have the same vital object and goal, and because this is itself the very object of *the life of God*." For Congar, the notion of theological virtue and the divine life

⁵⁵ Congar, "L'idée de l'Église," 59–61; "Idea of the Church," 332.

⁵⁶ For one might locate St. Thomas's ecclesiology in just one question of the *Tertia Pars*, q. 8, on the capital grace of Christ.

⁵⁷ Congar, "L'idée de l'Église," 90; "Idea of the Church," 358. In light of my focus below on "things" in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, it is important to note that the English in the version of the essay printed in *The Thomist* (presumably Congar's own text) gives "sacramental thing" where Congar says in French only "le mystère . . . sacramentaire," etc.

⁵⁸ Congar, "L'idée de l'Église," 64; "Idea of the Church," 335.

⁵⁹ Congar, "L'idée de l'Église," 69–70; "Idea of the Church," 340. This difficult notion seems to be polemically motivated, but I cannot offer a satisfactory explanation here of why Congar wants to deny "christocentrism," or what this means precisely. Positively speaking, he says here that "the ecclesiology of St. Thomas, like the ethic to which it is wedded, is *before all things* theocentric. . . . St. Thomas has thrown into relief the theological or theocentric phase before the 'Christ' and christocentric one. . . . [We find in his commentary on the Creed] an elemental notion which is anthropologic and ethic or pneumatologic and theocentric."

it makes possible for humans is emblematic of how the moral theology of the *secunda pars* is also an account of the Church's return to God: "Hence it is also true to say that the entire Second Part of the *Summa theologiae* is ecclesiology."⁶⁰

Congar wishes to emphasize that the Church is not only the Body of Christ, but also this moral and spiritual reality of human potency proceeding from and returning toward God: *motus creaturae rationalis in Deum*.⁶¹ He does not wish to minimize the importance of communion in Christ, much less subordinate it. Rather, Congar wishes to show how the consummation of the *tertia pars* relates to the treatment of man as image of God in the *secunda pars*: "The degrees of realization of the image of God, the analysis of whose richness and manifold phases is the work of the *Secunda Pars*, are correlatively degrees of incorporation into Christ."⁶²

He dwells at length on our participation in the Body of Christ as a society organized "by faith and the sacraments of the faith," *per fidem et fidei sacramenta*.⁶³ While he relates this to the hierarchy of the Church, the relation is troubled. He emphasizes the Body of Christ as the principle of "the Church as a society differentiated and established under a hierarchy."⁶⁴ He uses language that suggests Dionysius (purifying and illuminating) in describing the relationship of the "power over the Mystical Body" that the Church holds:

⁶⁰ Congar, "L'idée de l'Église," 66: "The manner in which we live the life of God is the manner appropriate to spirits, to men, that is, to have as everyday objects the everyday objects of the life of God. . . . Thus, to define the Church as a body in a shared life experience with God is to consider it as humanity itself insofar as it orients its life toward God, by means of the theological virtues, which have God himself as their object, and insofar as it organizes its life according to God by means of the moral virtues. The ecclesiology of St. Thomas is profoundly moral and theocentric. . . . Thus, in the *Summa theologiae*, the entire *secunda pars* is ecclesiological"; see "Idea of the Church," 337. The theological virtues have God as object in different ways. Congar cites numerous places in Aquinas's writings, but see, e.g., for charity, *ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 2, ad 2 ("God is effectively the life both of the soul by charity, and of the body by the soul: but formally charity is the life of the soul, even as the soul is the life of the body"); for faith, e.g., *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 2, ad 2 ("The believer's act does not terminate in the propositions, but in the realities").

⁶¹ He cites the prologues to *ST* I, q. 2, and *ST* III to make this point, in "L'idée de l'Église," 69. He substitutes *reditus* where Aquinas has *motus* ("de motu...").

⁶² Congar, "L'idée de l'Église," 75; "Idea of the Church," 345.

⁶³ Thomas used this phrase or a similar one throughout his writings; see Congar's references in "L'idée de l'Église," 84–89; "Idea of the Church," 353–58.

⁶⁴ Congar, "Idea of the Church," 352; cf. "L'idée de l'Église," 83.

the power to purify and enlighten souls by the preaching of the truth, and that of preparing or disposing for the reception of the Eucharist *by a juridical control*. . . . St. Thomas asserts that all such powers over souls come to the Church solely from the power or ministry which she has in the celebration of the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Christ Crucified, Sacrament of our Salvation.⁶⁵

Here, Congar distinguishes the juridical power of the Church from her essentially sacramental ministry. He does not pit the ministerial against the juridical, but in light of his eventual critique of hierarchical juridicism, we may note how he highlights the subordination of the juridical to the sacramental and Christological.

"L'idée de l'Église" outlines Congar's Thomistic ecclesiology. We see his emphasis on the Trinitarian and Christological structure of the life of the Church. In his comments on the importance of the theological virtues, we see the Thomistic grounds for emphasizing the powers of the human soul in speaking of the mystical communion of the Body of Christ. Dionysius, as a name, is absent from this work, but procession and return are prominent, conceived especially by reflecting on the structure of the *Summa theologiae*. Finally, the sacraments receive prominent place, contextualized within the "theocentric" vision of Christ and the Spirit as returning man to the Father.

But when he wanted to rehabilitate the idea of hierarchy, Congar turned away, not only from Dionysius, but also from Thomas. In his widely read essay on hierarchy as service, Congar pursues the admirable goal of showing that hierarchy is essentially God's instrument for revealing himself as Lord and Savior in the Church, coming in the counterintuitive form of a servant. Any Christian's reception of honor must mirror that of Jesus, but "Jesus himself has this honour only by reason of the mission he received from the Father. The Father alone is the principle without a source. All comes from him, all is called to return to him."⁶⁶ The Son "rediscovers the logic of the spirit. . . . This can be achieved only when the order of

⁶⁵ Congar, "L'idée de l'Église," 86 (emphasis mine); "Idea of the Church," 355. The language of "purify and enlighten" recalls the first two hierarchical powers in Dionysius. Within each of Dionysius's hierarchies, there is a threefold rank, distinguished according to power. Ranks and powers, though permanently distinguished, are ordered toward a sacred union. The threefold powers and the ranks that they distinguish, in ascending order, are the power to purify, to illumine, and to perfect. See *CH* 3.165C–168B; *EH* 5.1.3.504A–C.

⁶⁶ Congar, "La hiérarchie comme service," 70; *Power and Poverty*, 23.

obedience is perfectly fulfilled, when everything is brought back to its Principle, when 'God' is 'all in all.'"⁶⁷

Matthew Levering approves of this approach as providing an important theological ballast for hierarchy. After citing this essay of Congar's, Levering writes:

Ecclesiastical hierarchy must be shown to belong to the Trinitarian and Christological pattern of the communication of the divine life, a pattern that cannot be separated from the election of Israel and the covenantal structures of gifting, receptivity, and mediation that have shaped the people of God from the beginning.⁶⁸

We may consider also the Christological and Trinitarian conception of the Church described in *Lumen Gentium* §§2–4 as fulfilling this need. Congar shows consistency with his earlier "L'idée de l'Église," in which the human life of the Church, as in Thomas's *secunda pars*, is a return to God through God's own sharing of his inner, Trinitarian life.

Again, this is a matter of understanding the theological virtues. Congar expresses the relation between the divine life of faith and charity, and discusses this in relation to the role of the bishop and the concept of the state of perfection forged in the mendicant controversies. However, he removes this section from the later edition of "La hiérarchie comme service" in *Pour une Église servante et pauvre*, inserting in its place a few footnotes to Thomas's works.⁶⁹ There is a certain emphasis, even in the first version, on the personal quality of perfection.⁷⁰ Congar continues to underline the human development of virtuous service as constituting the Christian idea of hierarchy. According to him, both Scripture and Tradition point to this: "Authority in the Gospel is a relationship of *sub et supra* within the general relationship of service, which is the necessary accompaniment of being a Christian."⁷¹

⁶⁷ Congar, "La hiérarchie comme service," 74; *Power and Poverty*, 29.

⁶⁸ Matthew Levering, *Christ and the Catholic Priesthood* (Chicago: Hillenbrand, 2010), 4. Levering cites Congar similarly in his conclusion, summarizing the aim of his own book (278).

⁶⁹ Congar, "La hiérarchie comme service," 90–95; cf. *Pour une Église*, 86. Nicholson mistakenly gives "St. Bernard saw the episcopate" for "Saint Thomas a vu l'episcopat" (92). I imagine Congar's omission could either be attributed to the popular level of the new edition, or to the difficulty or unpopularity of Aquinas's theology of the episcopacy.

⁷⁰ Congar, "La hiérarchie comme service," 91–92.

⁷¹ Congar, "La hiérarchie comme service," 89; *Power and Poverty*, 91.

The problem of Dionysian hierarchy comes into full view as Congar concludes this essay. What is not often understood about Dionysius's ecclesiastical hierarchy is that although the second and third ranks belong to *men*, the first rank belongs to *things*: the sacraments themselves.⁷² Congar, who emphasizes interpersonal development among Christian men, and rightly so in most cases, adds that, in the Middle Ages and afterward, "the domain of men and the Christian community was neglected for the domain of *things*."⁷³

Congar is not referring there to sacraments, but to laws. This statement belongs to Congar's continuing discourse on the juridicizing trend of the Church's history.⁷⁴ While Congar is no enemy of the sacraments, it is important to note how his effort to regain the importance of personal relationships, in the teeth of overbearing legalism, leads to inadvertent conflict with the divine *things* that are, paradoxically, impersonal and supremely personal, the sacraments. His conception of the "Dionysian ideology" as juridical seems to have the unintended consequence of evacuating the theology of hierarchy of its sacramental and liturgical realism as well.

Congar lists some New Testament vocabulary of order and authority, claiming that *διακονία* is the term that most often expresses authority there. He points out the significance of its being connected to a task or activity, but does not seem to intend a reference to the sacramental actions so important for Dionysius. Rather, this is relational: "an assured service in the community."⁷⁵ He acknowledges ten uses of *τάξις* but adds that seven of them are from Hebrews to refer to Aaron and Melchizedek.⁷⁶ Tellingly, he notes here that the word "hierarchy" is absent from the New

⁷² The principal place of sacred rites or sacraments is best expressed at *EH* 5.1, where Dionysius articulates it twice in introducing the rite of clerical orders: "In our sacred tradition every hierarchy is divided into the most reverend sacraments [*τὰς ὁσιωτάτας τελετάς*]; those, inspired by God, who understand and purvey them; and those who are sacredly initiated by these" (*EH* 5.1.1.501A); "Like every hierarchy [ours] has a threefold division, namely the most holy operations of the sacraments [*τὰς ἁγιωτάτας τῶν τελετῶν ἱερουργίας*], the godlike dispensers of the sacred things, and those guided by them, according to capacity, toward the sacred" (*EH* 5.1.2.501D).

⁷³ Congar, "La hiérarchie comme service," 97 (emphasis and ellipsis original); *Power and Poverty*, 98.

⁷⁴ See "La hiérarchie comme service," 97. Congar's professed intention in much of the essay is to show how Christian authority as service is different from worldly authority (98). Yet it seems that he argues his point to the detriment of sacramental reality in the Christian dispensation.

⁷⁵ Congar, "La hiérarchie comme service," 80.

⁷⁶ Congar, "La hiérarchie comme service," 80–81. Elsewhere he suggests that there is no conceivable connection between the apostles and the Aaronic priesthood (82).

Testament.⁷⁷ This suggests that he is unfamiliar with the Dionysian provenance of the word.

Indeed, the only mention of Dionysius comes in the revised version of “La hiérarchie comme service,” in the section entitled “Destin historique.” His use of Dionysius there is odd:

Monasticism has often been represented as a protest against a Church that had become too worldly, too rich, too powerful in a physical sense for an eschatological Christianity which taught that the world should be opposed. In monasticism it was possible for a charismatic or spiritual authority to continue to exist. . . . This type of authority did in fact acquire a kind of autonomy in the Church in relation to the ordinary hierarchical structure. This was the case in the East. Both Origen and the pseudo-Areopagite held views which tended to link the illuminating and sanctifying effect of hierarchical acts with the interior and spiritual holiness of the minister.⁷⁸

I can find no evidence, for example in Congar’s “Aspects ecclésiologiques,” that he was aware of Dionysius’s important Epistle 8. In this literary instruction, one of ten, Dionysius, apparently as bishop, reprimands the monk Demophilus for assuming spiritual authority over a priest, invading the sanctuary, and preventing the reconciliation and communion of a sinner.⁷⁹ It is indeed misleading, in light of Dionysius’s Epistle 8, to say that the spiritual man could claim “autonomy in the Church in relation to the ordinary hierarchical structure.” Congar does not mean to vindicate Demophilus, of course, but to point out Dionysius’s attempt to attribute to the hierarch a true fullness of sacred knowledge and spiritual power. To do

⁷⁷ Congar, “La hiérarchie comme service,” 80.

⁷⁸ Congar, *Pour une Église*, 45; *Power and Poverty*, 47–8.

⁷⁹ See, for example, *Ep.* Epistle 8, no. 4: “Accept the place assigned to you by the divine deacons. Let them accept what the priests have assigned to them. Let the priests accept what the hierarchs have assigned to them. Let the hierarchs bow to the apostles and to the successors of the apostles. . . . This, then, is what I have to tell you about what you should know and do”; “I would never have believed that Demophilus could have so little awareness of God’s goodness and of his love for humanity, that he could forget how much he himself needed a merciful savior, that he could take it upon himself to reject the priests who are made worthy, out of goodness, and out of a sense of their own frailty, to ‘bear the errors of the people.’” See Golitzin, *Mystagogy*, 8. For a general study of the Eastern phenomenon to which Congar refers, see Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

so in this way, however, and to group him simply with Origen, suggests that Congar is (again) not particularly interested in Dionysius, or his concept of hierarchy.

Congar revisited the question of Thomistic ecclesiology in 1977, almost forty years after "L'idée de l'Église," in "Vision de l'Église," an Ottawa address on the feast of St. Thomas; the address appeared in publication in 1978. This later work to some extent reconciles the tension between a Thomistic approach—one that makes use of arguments from the structure of the *Summa theologiae*, the Trinitarian processions, the theological virtues, and Christology—and an approach which emphasizes communion.

After two sections on the importance of the theological virtues (especially faith) and the provisional status of the earthly Church in view of the homogeneity of the faith across past, present, and future, a third section provides a substantial account of the mystery of the Church as constituted by Christ and the Spirit.⁸⁰ Congar pays special attention to Thomas's theology of sacramental causality, articulating in turn Thomas's gradually developed teachings on the instrumental causality of the sacred humanity of Christ in *De veritate*⁸¹ and the power of the Holy Spirit as effecting sacramental communion in the faithful.⁸²

Among these comments, Congar again highlights the fact that "Thomas often says that the Church is founded and built by the faith and the sacraments of the faith."⁸³ God's action through the sacraments constitutes a relation of service between ministers and faithful. As in "La hiérarchie comme service," Congar is anxious to emphasize the office of a hierarchy, not in terms of superiority and inferiority, but as "a pure ministry, a service: 'he is not a master, but a steward.'"⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Congar, "Vision de l'Église," 529–36.

⁸¹ Congar, "Vision de l'Église," 530: "This thesis appears to us necessary and decisive in the theological project of St. Thomas." Many today agree: see, e.g., Reginald Lynch, *The Cleansing of the Heart: The Sacraments as Instrumental Causes in the Thomistic Tradition* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), for a recent study of Thomas's turn to instrumental efficacy in his sacramental theology.

⁸² Congar, "Vision de l'Église," 534–36.

⁸³ Congar, "Vision de l'Église," 531.

⁸⁴ Congar, "Vision de l'Église," 531: "These ministers do not, as such, have any efficacious action except *in persona Christi*, playing the role of Christ in a visible and public setting, *Prelatus in Ecclesia gerit vicem Dei* [In the Church, the Prelate takes the place of God]. But this is a pure ministry, a service: *non est dominus, sed dispensator* [he is not a lord, but a steward]. This ministry, however, has an eschatological efficacy. Coming from Christ, God made man, who has received all power on earth and in heaven (Matt 28:18), he is able, here below, to open the gates of heaven." The two Latin phrases are

In "Vision de l'Église," Congar affirms that Thomas's theology contains all the elements that go to make up a sound ecclesiology. But he regrets that Thomas lacks "consideration of these elements as forming a collective reality of the mediation of the grace of the Holy Spirit and of Christ; the consideration of the Church as Communion, and even a Communion of local or particular churches."⁸⁵ Interestingly, he believes that the ecclesiastical realities of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, including the division of order from jurisdiction according to geographic place seen especially in the mendicant orders, resulted in a problem for the theology of the Eucharist and holy orders, especially affecting the theology of the episcopacy.⁸⁶ For Congar, this manifests the problem of "treating the sacraments without explicit consideration of the Church, and above all of local and particular Churches."⁸⁷ The mendicant orders, exercising an itinerant clerical ministry, seem to sever the bond between local Church and its Eucharist, at least in principle. Thomas's successful theological defense of the mendicant ministry thus creates a speculative problem for the Eucharistic ecclesiologies of our own time, inspired by Congar and others.

This late, synthetic, and critical presentation of Thomas's thought shows how Congar sought to articulate a Thomistic theology of hierarchy that would retain the Thomist tradition's intellectual strength, but also admit of certain points of revision. He maintained here the importance of the sacraments for constituting the Body of Christ, even if he saw a problem regarding the relationship of clerical order and jurisdiction in Thomas's theology of holy orders, stemming from the mendicant controversy.⁸⁸

Congar recognized the importance of hierarchy, so much so that he offered an elaborate apology for the idea in "La hiérarchie comme service." But his defense of hierarchy was only reluctantly Thomistic—and emphatically non-Dionysian. He preferred to emphasize the Thomistic theology of the indwelling of God in the faithful through the theological virtues and the grace of Christ, an ecclesiological vision we see both toward the beginning and the end of his influential theological career. He saw the

from Aquinas, with many references given.

⁸⁵ Congar, "Vision de l'Église," 536.

⁸⁶ Congar, "Vision de l'Église," 537–38. He refers to the historical work of Joseph Lécuyer, "Les étapes de l'enseignement thomiste sur l'épiscopat," *Revue thomiste* 57 (1957): 29–52. The question interested Dominican Thomists in the era of Vatican II. See, e.g., Santiago Ramirez, O.P., *De episcopatu ut sacramento deque episcoporum collegio* (Salamanca: Instituto Histórico Dominicano de San Esteban, 1966).

⁸⁷ Congar, "Vision de l'Église," 537.

⁸⁸ Congar, "Vision de l'Église," 529.

sacraments as efficacious causes of this human participation in God's life, and embraced Thomas's important arguments for the nature of sacramental causality. Hierarchy, in Congar's eyes, needed to be rehabilitated as service, *διακονία*, and could only then be counted among the truly spiritual manifestations of the divinely structured Mystical Body. To make hierarchy appealing, Congar thought he needed to jettison Dionysius, and hide embarrassing Dionysian aspects of Aquinas.

Perfecting Hierarchy: Restoring Dionysius to Congar's Rehabilitated Hierarchy

Congar succeeded in rehabilitating hierarchy, striking a compromise with the "hierarchiological" approach of the past. This is evident in the documents of Vatican II, which contain abundant usage of the term "hierarchy." The broad effort to develop a "theology of the laity" in which Congar was involved also bore evident fruit, especially in Vatican II's *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity. In §3 of the decree, we read how, "through the faith, hope, and charity which the Holy Spirit diffuses in the hearts of all members of the Church," the laity receive an "apostolate," that is, a share in the Apostolic office of preaching the Gospel.⁸⁹ This recalls Congar's emphasis on the theological virtues and the Spirit within a "total ecclesiology" inspired by Thomistic moral theological principles.

The same passage states:

The laity derive the right and duty to the apostolate from their union with Christ the head; incorporated into Christ's Mystical Body through Baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through Confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord Himself. . . . The sacraments, . . . especially the most holy Eucharist, communicate and nourish that charity which is the soul of the entire apostolate.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Quotations are taken from the English translations provided by the Vatican website.

⁹⁰ *Apostolicam Actuositatem* exclusively follows the modern, binary usage of hierarchy—laity, rather than the ancient, broader usage, which can refer to "our hierarchy" as the full, ecclesiastical triad of sacraments—clergy—laity.

The text makes no reference to Pseudo-Dionysius.⁹¹ However, this passage is similar to Dionysian hierarchy, modified by Aquinas's theology of perfection: sacred initiation through the sacraments leads to a full ecclesiastical sharing in the hierarchic order, knowledge, and activity, perfected especially in charity.⁹²

Rather than focusing on the thirteenth-century usage of Dionysius to support a papalist hierarchiology, as Congar did, we might use Dionysius as a theological justification for magisterial assertions such as *Apostolicam Actuositatem* §3. In order to avail ourselves of Dionysius, however, it seems that we must overcome the prevailing understanding of Dionysian ecclesiology stemming from Vatican II's most prominent ecclesiological voice, Yves Congar.

In response to Congar's non-Dionysian rehabilitation of hierarchy, I offer the following five points of correction for a stronger rehabilitation of this essentially Dionysian concept: (1) a better neo-Platonist genealogy of Dionysius, (2) a unified sense of "our hierarchy" as including laity, (3) the Pauline or scriptural character of Dionysius's neologism, (4) recognition that Thomas is not less, but arguably more, Dionysian than other Western theologians of the Church, and (5) the enduring presence of Dionysius in Thomas's mature theology of Christian perfection.

- (1) A better neo-Platonist genealogy of Dionysius will admit not only the influence of Plotinus and borrowing from Proclus, but also the importance of sacraments as a form of neo-Platonist "theurgy." A significant dispute arose in the third and fourth centuries within the pagan neo-Platonist schools over "theurgy" as the privileged way to union with God.⁹³ Dionysius does bring with him a Plotinian God

⁹¹ See the reference to Dionysius in *Lumen Gentium* §28, note 66. This occurs within chapter 3, "On the Hierarchical Structure of the Church and in Particular on the Episcopate." The placement of this chapter after chapter 2, "On the People of God," is one of the best-known instances of the vindication of the theology of the laity—although it appears that the notion of "people" is intended to include both laity and clergy ("hierarchy").

⁹² See Gilles Emery, O.P., "The Ecclesial Fruit of the Eucharist in St. Thomas Aquinas," in *Trinity, Church, and the Human Person: Thomistic Essays* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2007), 155–72; Joseph Wawrykow, "The Greek Fathers in the Eucharistic Theology of Thomas Aquinas," in *Thomas Aquinas and the Greek Fathers*, ed. Michael Dauphinais, Andrew Hofer, and Roger Nutt (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2019), 274–302.

⁹³ This is documented in Iamblichus's *De mysteriis*, a response to Plotinus's disciple Porphyry: see Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, trans. Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbell (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003). For the most

who loves himself and is the source of an order of intellectual beings. But this heritage does nothing to predispose Dionysius to a "metaphysics of the One" that leads to overbearing papalism or legalism, as Congar suggests. Rather, Plotinus's Platonism is the basis for a metaphysics of return, which Dionysius will refine through his use of later neo-Platonist theology into a theory of sacramental worship that can be intellectually appreciated, but not exhausted. His notion of ascent and deification is not only intellectual, but theurgic.

- (2) The work of Christ is a work in which all participate. Both clergy and lay persons are taken up into the "theurgy" of Christ. Dionysius purifies theurgy of its polytheist character, and instead of a pagan pantheon, describes a universe of men and angels being divinized through sacramental participation in Jesus. This universal access to Christ through symbolic acts of his own institution should be central to a "theology of the laity."
- (3) Dionysius's "hierarchy" is indeed a novel term, but it names something that we can identify, in an inchoate form, in the writings of St. Paul. Dionysius's pseudonymity is a literary device signaling his intent to follow Paul's theology.⁹⁴ He especially develops Paul's theology of the Church and its order by imitating Paul's counsel to the "hierarch" Timothy. In writing as a Pauline thinker in a fifth or sixth century milieu of monastic conflict, Dionysius transposes Pauline theology into a new key. He uses Paul and other scriptural sources as his primary authorities, speaking in sophisticated philosophical terms to a later ecclesiastical audience.
- (4) Saint Thomas was accused by anti-mendicant theologians and canonists in his own time of transgressing hierarchy.⁹⁵ It would be a larger project to chart how he defends his Dionysian reading, from his early polemical work, the *Contra impugnantes*, through the *secunda secundae* of the *Summa theologiae*. Both William of Saint-Amour and Congar, in opposed ways, think that Thomas Aquinas is "less Dionysian" than

extensive study of theurgy, see Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, 2nd ed. (Kettering, OH: Angelico, 2014). David V. Meconi gives a very helpful comparison of Augustine and Dionysius, showing how both of these Christian Neoplatonists developed a Eucharistic theology in response to the phenomenon of pagan theurgy ("Augustine and Dionysius the Areopagite: Two Christian Responses to Theurgy," in *Divine Promise and Human Freedom in Contemporary Catholic Thought*, ed. Kevin A. McMahon [Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2015], 15–36).

⁹⁴ Stang, *Apophysis and Pseudonymity*, 3.

⁹⁵ William of Saint-Amour, *De periculis novissimorum temporum*, trans. G. Geltner (Leuven: Peeters, 2008), e.g., 56–57.

his theological rivals. Aquinas responds directly to the challenge to his Dionysian loyalty, showing that he understands Dionysius's basic notion of "our hierarchy" better than some thirteenth-century secular Masters. He notices Dionysius's comments on hierarchy in *EH* 5.1 in a way that few others do, and like Dionysius he is disposed to a sacraments-first approach to Church order.⁹⁶ Like the critique of William, that of Congar proceeds *ex malo intellectu Dionysii*. Thomas's following of Dionysius here, incidentally, brings him into harmony with Eastern ecclesiology, an enduring concern of Congar's.

- (5) Thomas's mature theology of Christian perfection in *ST* II-II, qq. 184–89, is a Dionysian-influenced one, augmented especially by his reading of Gregory the Great. His polemical focus leads him to spell out Christian perfection in the way that he sees it most clearly on display: in the Dominican life of contemplation and preaching.⁹⁷ But this culmination, in which perfect *religio* perfectly mirrors the active and contemplative life of the apostle, fits within the broader arc of the *secunda pars*. As Congar rightly emphasizes, this work describes a universal spiritual movement. It is the pneumatological and moral *motus creaturae rationalis in Deum* captured speculatively. The implicit ordering toward Christ of the *secunda pars*, and the explicit treatment of the grace of Christ in the Incarnation and the sacraments in the *tertia pars*, is in harmony with Dionysius's liturgical presentation of the divinizing sacraments in the *EH*.

Congar allows a faulty understanding of Dionysian hierarchy to hold a central place in his project of salvaging Aquinas and refounding the idea of hierarchy as service. Thomas's polemical works, including the *secunda secundae*, show that his theology of the Church is indeed influenced by Dionysius "in its deep lines."⁹⁸ And this is a blessing for the theology of hierarchy. Dionysian hierarchy makes every member of the Church, from bishop to catechumen, a sharer in the luminous works of God. The idea

⁹⁶ Aquinas, *Contra impugnantes*, ch. 2: "In chapter 4 [our chapter 5] of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Dionysius distinguishes our hierarchy into three parts [*in tria*]: sacred actions, those who communicate them, and those who only receive them" (Leonine ed., 41A:55 [lines 41–44]).

⁹⁷ *ST* II-II, q. 188, a. 6. This should be understood in the context (1) of Thomas's having to defend, throughout his life, the very existence of the Order of Preachers, (2) of the dignity of the apostles in mediating grace and doctrine to the entire Church, and (3) of the ultimately contemplative vocation of all Christians to see God in the beatific vision.

⁹⁸ Congar, "Aspects ecclésiologiques," 132.

of hierarchy, while obscure to the uninitiated, does not seem to entail the problem of bureaucratic mediation that some fear. Because Christ the "theurgist" is present in liturgy and sacraments, his divinizing power is accessible to every Christian in rites passed on by certain ministers—an economy that Christ established, and through which he actively works.⁹⁹ Dionysius gives, not an obsessive "hierarchiology" of clerical discipline, but an exposition of "our hierarchy" as a varied yet beautifully ordered sharing in the light of Christ, leading us back to the Father of Lights.¹⁰⁰ N.V.

⁹⁹ See Pavlos, "Theurgy," 158–61.

¹⁰⁰ See the very beginning of *CH*, Dionysius's gloss on James 1:17: "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights." He refers pointedly to "Jesus, the Light of the Father."