

The Reception of Doctrine: New Perspectives

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As Christians we believe that the Word of God has been spoken into human history from the beginning of creation and that, “in the fullness of time,” this Word became flesh as Jesus of Nazareth, the Word incarnate. The sacred scriptures are the church’s inspired, written testimony to that Word. Roman Catholicism, along with the Orthodox and Anglican communions, also affirms that as these scriptures are proclaimed, prayed, studied and applied in the life of Christian communities a living tradition emerges. The apostolic character of this tradition is authenticated and proclaimed doctrinally by the college of bishops, those who succeed to the authority of the college of the apostles. In the Catholic theologies of tradition that have developed from the time of the Council of Trent up to the 1950’s, reflection on the way in which this apostolic faith has been “handed on” has focused on the teaching of the bishops. However, in the second half of the twentieth century Catholic theology began to acknowledge that the teaching of doctrine could not be understood apart from the ecclesial process of *receptio*, the work of the whole church in the reception of what has been taught.

In this essay I would like to sketch very briefly the development of reception as an ecclesiological category in Catholic theology, and then consider the ways in which theological appropriations of modern hermeneutics, literary theory, communications theory and the study of popular religion can further enrich our theology of reception and consequently our understanding of the nature of doctrinal teaching authority in the church. I will conclude by proposing a heuristic model for understanding the way in which the processes of ecclesial reception relate to the bishops’ unique responsibility for the teaching of doctrine.

I. Initial Post-Conciliar Developments Toward a Theology of Ecclesial Reception

In the years immediately after the Second Vatican Council, scholars¹ first began to pay attention to the role of reception in the life of the church. Initially, reception referred to the process by which some teaching, ritual, discipline or law was assimilated into the life of a local church. One of the first scholars to develop a theology of ecclesial reception, Alois Grillmeier, was indebted to certain theories of legal reception in which a legal tradition from one group of peoples is “received” or taken over by another group. Within this legal framework reception, strictly speaking, must be “exogenous,” that is, it is a reception of something within a community which comes to it from the outside, i.e., from another community. Grillmeier, applying this legal theory to the life of the church, saw it as a helpful way to describe the ecclesial process by which the ancient churches accepted synodal decrees from other churches as binding for themselves.² He also seemed to have had in mind the modern ecumenical situation in which separated churches might eventually receive certain teachings and/or practices from another church.

In a well known essay, Yves Congar contended that Grillmeier had defined “reception” too narrowly by insisting on its exogenous character.³ It is certainly true that any act of authentic reception presupposes some kind of distance between the party giving and the party receiving. However, Congar pointed out that since local churches are not autonomous entities but exist in spiritual communion with one another, this distance is always relativized by the unity of the whole church. That which is received by one local church from another or others, can never be totally foreign. Congar also had a much broader conception of reception; he refused to

¹ Cf. Alois Grillmeier, “Konzil und Rezeption. Methodische Bemerkungen zu einem Thema der ökumenischen Diskussion der Gegenwart,” *Theologie und Philosophie* 45 (1970): 321-52 and Yves Congar, “La ‘réception’ comme réalité ecclesiologique,” in *Église et papauté: Regards historiques* (Paris: Cerf, 1994), 229-66 [For an abbreviated English translation see “Reception as an Ecclesiological Reality,” in *Election and Consensus in the Church {Concilium 77}*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Anton Weiler (New York: Herder, 1972), 43-68. For other notable studies on the topic see, Angel Antón, “La ‘recepción’ en las Iglesia y ecclesiología (I). Sus fundamentos teológicos y procesos históricos en acción desde la epistemología teológica y ecclesiología sistemática,” *Gregorianum* 77 (1996): 57-96; idem, “La ‘recepción’ en las Iglesia y ecclesiología (II). Fundamentos teológico-ecclesiológicos de la ‘recepción’ desde la ecclesiología sistemática posconciliar,” *Gregorianum* 77 (1996): 437-69; J.M.R. Tillard, “Tradition, Reception,” in *The Quadriolog. Tradition and the Future of Ecumenism* [Festschrift for George Tavard] (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 328-43; idem, “Reception—Communion,” *One in Christ* 28 (1992): 307-22; Hermann J. Pottmeyer, “Reception and Submission,” *The Jurist* 51 (1991): 269-92; Thomas Rausch, “Reception Past and Present,” *Theological Studies* 47 (1986) 497-508; Edward Kilmartin, “Reception in History: An Ecclesiological Phenomenon and Its Significance,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 21 (1984): 34-54; W. Hryniewicz, “Die ekklesiale Rezeption in der Sicht der orthodoxen Theologie,” *Theologie und Glaube* 65 (1975): 250-66.

² Grillmeier, 324.

³ Congar, “La ‘réception’ comme réalité ecclesiologique.”

limit reception to the process of a community receiving a law or decree from outside its boundaries. For him reception denoted a constitutive process in the church's self-realization in history. Congar linked reception with that ancient reality which he refers to as "conciliarity." For Congar, conciliarity described, not just an ecclesiastical event—an ecumenical council—but the fundamental reality of the church constituted by the Spirit as a communion of persons. Councils then, are formal expressions of what pertains to the reality of the church itself: "...reception is no more than the extension or prolongation of the conciliar process: it is associated with the same essential 'conciliarity' of the Church."⁴ By correlating reception with conciliarity, Congar helped direct our attention to the quality of ecclesial relationship essential for a proper understanding of the enunciation of God's Word in the Christian community.

Both Grillmeier and Congar cited instances in which ecclesial reception had been operative in the life of the early church. They saw ecclesial reception at work in the way in which local churches received (or at times did not receive) the authoritative pronouncements of synods and councils, as when all the churches eventually assimilated into their life and worship the creeds of Nicaea and Constantinople. One could speak of a process of reception at work in the gradual acceptance of those ancient texts which would become the canonical scriptures of the church. An example of liturgical reception occurred when the churches of the West received the Eastern liturgical tradition of the *epiklesis* into their liturgy.

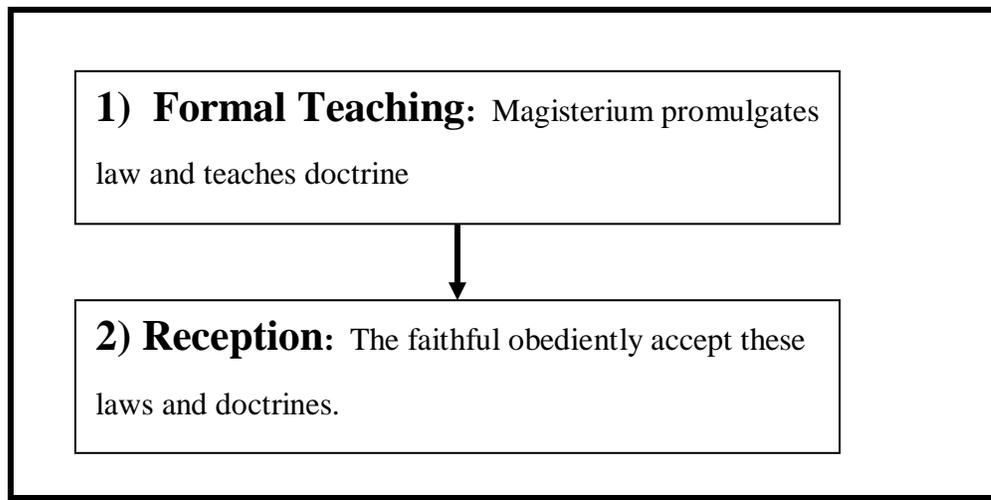
This renewed appreciation for the role of ecclesial reception also entailed a reassessment of the apostolic ministry of the bishops. By the end of the second century the church already possessed a developed theology of the bishops as apostolic ministers charged with the authentication, proclamation and preservation of the apostolic faith. Yet these studies recognized that this unique teaching ministry of the bishops was viewed within the context of a vision of the whole church as recipient of God's Word. That which was taught by the bishops was always understood, in some sense, already to be in the possession of the church. Bishops' teaching and ecclesial reception were inseparable dimensions of the larger process of handing on the apostolic faith.

This ancient process of ecclesial reception was weakened considerably in the second millennium. When the church of the late Middle Ages and Counter-Reformation moved away

⁴ Congar, "Reception as an Ecclesiological Reality," 64. See also, Yves Congar, "The Council as an Assembly and the Church as Essentially Conciliar," in *One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic. Studies on the Nature and Role of the*

from an ancient ecclesiology of communion⁵ in favor of a more pyramidal or “hierocratic” view of the church, the role of the hierarchy as the exclusive teachers of the church began to emerge and an appreciation for the broader processes of ecclesial reception diminished. During the late Middle Ages the dynamic, theological understanding of reception as the church’s active appropriation of some articulation of its faith was replaced by a view of reception governed by the juridical notion of obedience. Wolfgang Beinert writes that reception, by the end of the Middle Ages, “became identical with the act through which the precept of the highest ecclesial authority as well as his subordinates was received and carried out in will and action.”⁶ This model is reflected in figure 1.

FIGURE 1: Hierocratic Model of Doctrinal Teaching and Reception



Church in the Modern World, edited by Herbert Vorgrimler (London: Sheed & Ward, 1968), 44-88.

⁵ I realize that use of *koinonia* or *communio* in reference to ecclesiology has become so widespread and applied in such diverse ways as to render it difficult to identify one discernible ecclesiology. By an ecclesiology of communion I am invoking an ecclesiology, common in the early centuries, which views the church, not as an aggregate of individuals, nor as a society divided into different ranks and classes, but as a gathering of persons drawn into the triune life of God in Christ, through faith and baptism, by the power of the Holy Spirit. This gathering of persons, effected by the Holy Spirit is constituted by a two-fold participation, first in the triune life of God and second in a set of transformed ecclesial relationships among believers. The principal sacramental manifestation of this ecclesial communion is the celebration of the eucharist under the presidency of an apostolic minister in which the Word of God is preached and the bread broken. This eucharistic foundation leads us to see the whole church not as a monolithic super-structure but as a communion of eucharistic communions. Within the spiritual communion of the church the grace of God and/or the Word of God are experienced, not as a spiritual commodity dispensed from above through the hierarchy and trickling down to the laity, but as a spiritual reality manifested within the life of ecclesial communion.

⁶ Wolfgang Beinert, “The Subjects of Ecclesial Reception,” *The Jurist* 57 (1997): 329-30. See also, Hermann Pottmeyer, “Reception and Submission,” *The Jurist* 51 (1991): 269-92.

Lost was the important difference between a law issued by command or decree, and the gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed in doctrinal form. Divine revelation, no longer a disclosure event addressed to minds and hearts, became an external norm. The paradigm of command-obedience extended beyond its proper juridical sphere to influence the entire teaching ministry of the church.

It was only with the important work in historical theology, much of which was associated with the *nouvelle théologie* movement of the 1940s and 1950s, that contemporary theology was able to recover the earlier, more dynamic ecclesiology of communion that would have such an impact on the bishops at Vatican II. Admittedly, Vatican II offered no developed theology of ecclesial reception. While one may find the employment of the Latin verb *recipere* 35 times in the conciliar documents, the bishops more commonly coordinated to the process of “handing on the faith” (*tradere*) the Latin verb *accipere*, which appears some 90 times in the documents.⁷ This word choice suggests that traces of the more obediential approach to reception were not purged from the council’s ecclesiological vision.⁸ In spite of this, it cannot be denied that the larger developments of the council created an ecclesiological framework much more congenial to the ancient process of ecclesial reception. These larger developments are evident in the following: an emphasis on the elevated dignity of all the baptized, a positive theology of the laity and a broader consideration of the church as the People of God; a more developed theology of the local church; an explicit theology of the bishop as pastor and principal eucharistic minister of the local church; the development of an understanding of episcopal collegiality; a more dynamic sense of tradition; the treatment of the *sensus fidei*; more attention to the pneumatological dimension of ecclesiology.

It is the careful historical analysis of Grillmeier and Congar that opened up a fruitful line of theological inquiry in the decades after the council. Other theologians like J-M.R. Tillard, Wolfgang Beinert, Hervé Legrand, Angel Antón, Hermann Pottmeyer would follow, developing further Grillmeier and Congar’s initial insights into the place of ecclesial reception in the life of the church. While it is impossible to do justice to the many contributions of these scholars to a

⁷ Gilles Routhier, “Reception in the Current Theological Debate,” *Jurist* 57 (1997): 31.

⁸ Olivier Clément, “Après Vatican II: Vers dialogue théologique entre catholiques et orthodoxes,” *La Pensée Orthodoxe* 13 (1968): 46.

theology of reception, we can at least summarize some of the more significant conclusions drawn from their work.

1) The process of ecclesial reception involves an active discernment by the churches regarding the authenticity of that which is being “received.” As Jean-Marie Tillard observes, reception involves “recognition” by the individual and/or community in which, in some sense, what is received is already “known,” however implicitly, by the receiver/receiving community.⁹ Thus reception can only follow upon a prior recognition in which the receiver/receiving community *recognizes* their own faith, however new its expression, in that which they receive.

2) This process of recognition-reception includes not just the discernment which takes place prior to the formal acceptance of a teaching, rite or discipline, but its assimilation into the life of the community as well. In other words, when a community accepts a particular doctrinal formulation or liturgical discipline, for example, the community itself is transformed in the process. Reception means not mere acceptance, but transformation, both of the receiving community and that which is received. Consequently, while reception is always receiving something that has been recognized as familiar, it at the same time “produces something new.”¹⁰ There is an undeniably creative element, an element that involves the unexpected or unforeseen which makes the event of reception so necessary to the continued vitality of tradition.

3) Reception is an event which develops over time, often beyond the boundaries of a single generation. This is particularly evident if we consider the gradual process of reception involved in the cases of the canon of scripture and the reception of the Council of Nicea. The latter took over fifty years and the former took several centuries to achieve universal consensus.

4) All forms of ecclesial reception are grounded in the reception of the living Word of God. Tillard and Hervé Legrand have both explored the relationship between ecclesial reception and a theology of tradition.¹¹ Legrand observes that in the New Testament, the ecclesial activities of both transmitting and receiving the faith are correlative. St. Paul reminded the

⁹ J.-M.R. Tillard, in *Initiation à la pratique de la théologie*, ed. By Bernard Lauret and Francois Refoulé (Paris: Cerf, 1982), 1: 165-6; “Reception—Communion,” 312.

¹⁰ Bernard Sesboué, “Reception of Councils from Nicea to Constantinople II: Conceptual Divergences and Unity in the Faith, Yesterday and Today,” *Jurist* 57 (1997): 116.

¹¹ J.-M.R. Tillard, “Tradition, Reception,” in *The Quadrilog: Essays in Honor of George H. Tavard*, edited by Kenneth Hagan (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 328-43; idem, “Reception—Communion,” *One in Christ* 28 (1992): 307-22; idem, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 118-44; Hervé Legrand, “Reception, *Sensus Fidelium*, and Synodal Life: An Effort at Articulation,” *The Jurist* 57 (1997): 405-31.

Corinthians that they have already “received” the gospel he preached, a gospel which he himself received (I Cor. 15:1). In Acts, those who “accepted” Peter’s message were baptized (Acts 2:41).¹² Earlier in I Corinthians Paul insists with regard to the Eucharist that he is passing on that which he himself received from the Lord (I Cor. 11:23). Yet, Legrand contends, if tradition demands a reception, nevertheless tradition must be given priority for the economy of salvation always begins with God’s gracious initiative.

For Tillard as well, reception must begin with an understanding of divine revelation as a living Word, in contradistinction to the vulgarization of certain scholastic understandings that often presented the deposit of faith given to the church as a “filing cabinet” of propositional truths. A theology of revelation and tradition must begin with the living Word that is “received” and sustained in the life of the church itself. God’s Word is enunciated in the proclamation of the scriptures, in the life stories of the newly baptized, in the celebration of the liturgy, and in the reflection of believers struggling to incarnate the gospel in the workplace and in their homes.

5) Reception is itself constitutive of the church. Thomas Rausch remarks that “what resulted from the reception of the apostolic preaching by those who became the converts of the apostles and other early Christian missionaries was the Church itself.”¹³ The Venerable Bede once observed that “every day the church gives birth to the church.”¹⁴ Commenting on this, Joseph Komonchak writes:

The apostolic Gospel comes with the power of the Spirit and is received by faith, and where this event of communication takes place, the Church is born again. Where this event does not take place, where the Gospel is preached in vain, no Church arises. Where the Gospel ceases to be believed, the Church ceases to exist. The whole ontology of the Church—the real “objective” existence of the Church—consists in the reception by faith of the Gospel. Reception is constitutive of the Church.¹⁵

¹² For recent studies of the dynamics of ecclesial reception in the early church see Emmanuel Lanne, “Reception in the Early Church: Fundamental Processes of Communication and Communion,” *The Jurist* 57 (1997): 53-72; Gilles Routhier, *La réception d’un concile* (Paris: Cerf, 1993), 43ff.; Klaus Schatz, “Die Rezeption ökumenischer Konzilien im ersten Jahrtausend—Schwierigkeiten, Formen der Bewältigung und verweigerter Rezeption,” in *Glaube als Zustimmung. Zur Interpretation kirchlicher Rezeptionsvorgänge*, ed. by Wolfgang Beinert (Freiburg: Herder, 1991), 93-122.

¹³ Rausch, 498-9.

¹⁴ *PL* 93:166d.

¹⁵ Joseph Komonchak, “The Epistemology of Reception,” *The Jurist* 57 (1997): 193.

Methodologically, most of these studies exhibit a rich theological reflection on the dynamisms of ecclesial reception through a careful analysis of our Christian tradition. They have demonstrated the ways in which the “traditioning” process of the church, that complex set of ecclesial dynamisms by which the apostolic faith is handed on, can only be grasped adequately by attending to both the processes of normative doctrinal teaching and the wider processes by which the apostolic faith is received by the larger church. Understood broadly, these works are all examples of that fruitful line of theological study captured by the French term, *ressourcement*.

However, if one looks at the field of theology in the last thirty years, we find a number of creative works which reach out beyond the fields of historical theology, biblical studies and church history to initiate a creative conversation between theology and the fields of hermeneutics, literary theory, communications theory and cultural anthropology.

II. Appropriating New Resources for a Theology of the Reception of Doctrine

In this second section I would like to survey some of the recent developments in Catholic theology that are enriching our understanding of the relationship between normative, doctrinal teaching and ecclesial reception.

A. Modern Hermeneutics

While the application of hermeneutical theory to the study of doctrine has been a common place in Protestantism since early in the nineteenth century, in Roman Catholicism the anti-modernist reaction of Catholic leadership seriously retarded the early appropriation of hermeneutical theory by Catholic theologians. Consequently, it has only been in the years since the council that we have witnessed in Roman Catholic theology a flourishing of theologies that have reflected on the role of tradition and doctrine by drawing on the resources of modern hermeneutics (e.g., Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur).

The French theologian Claude Geffré has been one of the leading Catholic theologians to employ modern hermeneutical theory in Catholic theology.¹⁶ Geffré contends that since the council we have been witnessing a gradual shift from “dogmatic theology” to “hermeneutical

¹⁶ Claude Geffré, *Le Christianisme au risque de l'interprétation* (Paris: Cerf, 1987) [ET: *The Risk of Interpretation* (Mahwah, Paulist, 1987)].

theology.” The former came to dominate Catholic thought during the counter-reformation and endured up to the eve of Vatican II. Dogmatic theology operated within a “closed and authoritarian system” and involved the employment of speculative reason in service of “faithful commentary on dogma.” Hermeneutical theology, on the other hand, without rejecting dogma, emphasizes instead the historicity of all truth, including revealed truth.¹⁷ This shift might also be characterized as a move from the category of “dogma” to that of “testimony.” In the dogmatic theology of the counter-reformation, dogma was often viewed as a propositional “container” of divine truth. “Testimony” also presupposes a role for dogmatic statements, but within the framework of testimony the truth-value of a statement is inextricably bound up with the proclamation event, on the one hand, and the reception of that proclamation, on the other. The process of grasping “truth” is unavoidably hermeneutical, and consequently, open-ended.

David Tracy, from the University of Chicago, is the best known among American theologians to explore the hermeneutical character of the theological project. Like Geffré, Tracy draws heavily on the philosophical hermeneutics of both Gadamer and Ricoeur. Also like Geffré, Tracy contends that the Christian tradition itself develops as a result of the hermeneutical character of human understanding.¹⁸ To develop this Tracy turns to Gadamer’s understanding of the “classic.”

For Gadamer the “classic” referred to any particular symbol, event, artistic work or text which endures in history and continues to claim the attention of successive generations by drawing them into “conversation.” This conversation takes place between the historical horizon of the classic and the contemporary horizon of the interpreter. This conversation is in fact the working out of that dialectic between continuity and change, between tradition and innovation. While the task of understanding and application always takes place within tradition (we are never presuppositionless interpreters) the event of understanding is always new; it is an event that furthers the tradition in new and unanticipated ways.¹⁹ Gadamer’s approach avoids two

¹⁷ Geffré, *The Risk of Interpretation*, 48-50.

¹⁸ Tracy’s approach is developed in his, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

¹⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1975), 325-41.

extremes: the conservatism of uncritically accepting past understandings of a text and the subjectivism of looking to a text to support one's prejudgments.²⁰

Tracy makes a helpful contribution to our understanding of the relationship between doctrinal teaching and ecclesial reception with his twofold insight that any text that becomes a classic, that is, any text that continues to engage new generations of interpreters, by that very fact is "normative."²¹ Here normativity, long considered within the framework of a juridical "command-obedience" paradigm, now refers to the capacity of a text to continue to "claim our attention." At the same time, if the text is to continue to function as a classic its future must remain open, at least in the sense that there can be no fixed, definitive interpretation that would constitute the end of a text's effective history.

Paul Crowley specifically applies Gadamer's notion of the "classic" to the role of doctrine within the development of church tradition. When Gadamer's hermeneutical theory is applied to church doctrine, it allows us to view a doctrine as both laying a normative claim on contemporary belief even as its contemporary "application" means a new conversation must transpire between the historical horizon of the doctrine itself (its normative "tradition") and the horizon of the contemporary believer (and/or believing community) which carries within it a new set of expectations, questions and concerns. A doctrinal "classic," with its own tradition of interpretations and normative meanings, confronts and addresses the believer/believing community's own "horizon"—that set of prejudgments, expectations, questions and concerns which engages the doctrine.²²

It is Crowley's contention that this Gadamerian approach to doctrine is particularly appropriate to the demands of a pluralistic church. For while the doctrine retains the capacity to claim the attention of the contemporary believer (it is "normative"), it effects a multiplicity of conversations with believers, each of whom brings to the conversation their own particular horizon of expectation.

For example, in the light of the strong religio-cultural bonds with their ancestors which many east-Asian and African cultures possess, one might expect that the "reception" of the

²⁰ Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 139.

²¹ Tracy, 108.

²² Paul Crowley, *In Ten Thousand Places: Dogma in a Pluralistic Church* (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1997), 122-3.

doctrine of the communion of saints might well differ from that of North American Christians whose sense of extended family is much more attenuated. The communion of saints remains a “normative” doctrine even as it engenders a plurality of ecclesial conversations and, consequently, ecclesial meanings for that doctrine.

The most significant advantage of the hermeneutical approach to doctrine of Geffré, Tracy, Crowley and others lies in the way in which dialogue and conversation are given a constitutive role in the continuing vitality of a doctrine. A too narrow focus on the teaching of doctrine by the magisterium will lead to a preoccupation with questions of doctrinal normativity. By broadening consideration to include reception one can attend not just to the matter of normativity, but also to that of vitality. In a strict juridical sense, a doctrinal teaching may be normative, but if it is not received in the life of the church it will have no vitality—it will make no compelling claim on the lives of believers. It is a community’s authentic reception of a teaching through the act of interpretation that allows that teaching to become effective.

Both the advantages and the limits of this use of Gadamer are highlighted in Terry Veling’s recent work on the hermeneutical dimension of ecclesial life. Veling suggests that there are three different hermeneutical stances possible within the Christian tradition. The first is a *dialogical* hermeneutic that employs a hermeneutic of trust and retrieval through respectful dialogue with the classics of our tradition (he refers to this as standing “within the book”). Veling finds Gadamer particularly useful in service of this ecclesial dialogue. There are many within the Christian community who look to their tradition with hope and trust that it will continue to yield new insight into the demands of Christian living. However, not everyone finds themselves capable of this stance of trust presupposed by a dialogical hermeneutics. This difficulty gives rise to a second position indebted to the well known challenge to Gadamer raised by Jürgen Habermas.²³ The substance of Habermas’ critique lies in his suspicion that Gadamer is too sanguine about the trustworthiness of tradition. Tradition may well distort more than reveal; too often tradition veils ideological interests concerned with domination and power. The Habermasian critique of Gadamer suggests the need for a second hermeneutical stance, what Veling refers to as *exilic* hermeneutics, the stance of those who feel exiled from their tradition yet who still cannot ignore it—they stand “outside the book.” Finally, Veling advocates a third

²³ Jürgen Habermas, “A Review of Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*,” in *The Hermeneutic Tradition*, edited by G. Ormiston and A. Schrift (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 213-44.

hermeneutic stance which he describes as *marginal* (standing “in the margins of the book”). This third stance tries to live within the tension between the dialogical and exilic hermeneutical stances.

In the more usual and ready-to-hand terms, perhaps we could call it a “hermeneutic of creative reconstruction” that is shaped in the interplay between a hermeneutic of retrieval and a hermeneutic of suspicion....Marginal hermeneutics is this “being both.” It is the site of the “between” such that it resists being pinned down....Marginal hermeneutics is what happens when the twin events of belonging and nonbelonging, faith and doubt, trust and suspicion, the written and the unwritten, presence and absence—when these “unresolved two” burst into life in the thin, interpretive edge that both joins and separates them.²⁴

Though again, Veling does not directly address this question, it seems to me that his development of both exilic and marginal hermeneutics further illuminates the process of ecclesial reception by moving the discussion beyond the largely juridical framing of reception as binary: reception vs. non-reception.

Almost all of the literature on the reception of doctrine assumes that reception is essentially an issue for ecclesial “insiders.” That is, one generally finds a fairly univocal understanding of the *fideles*, those who stand as the recipients of doctrine. Using Veling’s terminology, theological literature has generally limited the *fideles* to those who “stand within the book.” But can this be sustained on ecclesiological grounds? On the ecumenical front, the Second Vatican Council avoided the trap of sharply distinguishing members from non-members of Christ’s church. Rather, both in *Lumen gentium* # 15 and in *Unitatis redintegratio*, the council assumed a continuum of degrees of incorporation within the body of Christ. Can this same elasticity be brought to bear in the discussion of ecclesial reception? That is, can we acknowledge that those who find themselves estranged from the church, whether because of dissent, or because the concrete circumstances of one’s life situation are currently at odds with the discipline of the church (e.g., divorced and re-married Catholics, gays in committed intimate relationships), still stand in a real relationship to the church and its tradition? As Veling has observed, those in exile are never strictly outsiders, for they often retain a longing for their

²⁴ Terry A. Veling, *Living in the Margins: Intentional Communities and the Art of Interpretation* (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1996), 136.

“homeland.” The stance of those in Christianity who either “live in exile” or at least “in the margins,” e.g., those women who feel oppressed and excluded by the tradition, must also be given voice in the process of authentic doctrinal reception.

B. Reader Reception Theory

Another, more recent contribution has come from theologians who have applied new developments in literary theory to theological questions of reception. Of particular note are two major studies by Ormond Rush and Linda Gaither.²⁵ The *Rezeptionsästhetik* theory associated with the “Constance school” in Germany and its correlative reader reception theory developed in North America emerged in the field of literary criticism as a reaction to earlier developments. Proponents of these new literary theories, while manifesting markedly different emphases, all sought to avoid the one-sided preoccupation with the historical-critical retrieval of the intentionality of a text’s author associated with the hermeneutical theory of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey and other 19th century figures. However, these theorists were equally disenchanted with formalist, structuralist and even post-structuralist preoccupations with the text itself. To redress this imbalance, reader reception theorists have called for greater attention to the *addressee* of a particular text and to the way in which the reception of the text by a reader must be seen as a constitutive element of the literary production itself.²⁶

Ormond Rush has developed a comprehensive theology of the reception of doctrine largely in conversation with the contributions of Hans Robert Jauss. Central to Jauss’s writing on philosophical aesthetics and hermeneutics is the way in which an audience’s aesthetic reception of a work actually enters into the constitution of the work itself, creating an effective history for that work. For example, for Jauss, a “text” only becomes a literary “work” when it is engaged in dialogue. The work is not an object but an event constituted by an inseparable triad

²⁵ Ormond Rush, *The Reception of Doctrine: An Appropriation of Hans Robert Jauss’ Reception Aesthetics and Literary Hermeneutics* (Rome: Gregorian, 1997); Linda L. Gaither, *To Receive a Text: Literary Reception Theory as a Key to Ecumenical Reception* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997). Since Gaither’s work focuses on ecumenical reception, I will limit myself to the work of Rush.

²⁶ Three representative figures in this movement are Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss and Wayne Booth. Cf. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1974); *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1978); Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* [Theory and History of Literature Series, vol. 2] trans. by Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1982); *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutic* [Theory and History of Literature Series, vol. 3] trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1982); Hans Robert Jauss, *Question and Answer: Forms of Dialogic Understanding*. [Theory and History of Literature Series, vol. 68] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961).

of 1) author/artist, 2) text/artistic production, and 3) reader/viewer.²⁷ This leads to a unique understanding of the historicity of the work, a historicity which must be understood in three different senses. One can speak of 1) the “work” in history which consists in an historical-critical analysis of a work’s *Sitz im Leben*, 2) the history of the “work,” which is the history of the work’s reception and 3) the work’s effect on history as it becomes an agent for change in society.²⁸

Particularly pertinent to our topic is Jauss’ critique of the notion of the “classic” developed by Gadamer. Jauss approved of Gadamer’s use of the image of conversation between the interpreter and the text. Also, for Jauss as for Gadamer, the metaphor of “horizon” as a field of vision is central. Any authentic work will stimulate a conversation between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter. However, against Gadamer, Jauss would suggest that it is the reader and not the text who initiates the conversation. He also expressed concern that the category of the classic encouraged the illusion that through the classic the past might become available to the present in an unmediated way without recourse to the difficult work of interpretation.²⁹ Consequently, he was also sympathetic to Habermas’ critique of Gadamer for failing to do justice to the ideological “interests” often at work in the naïve reception of a classic.

It is no surprise that Ormond Rush would find in Jauss’ thought a background theory for understanding the dynamisms of ecclesial reception in a manner not unlike Grillmeier’s dependence on legal studies. If we begin with the theology of revelation as symbolic mediation, Rush believes that Jauss’ aesthetic theory can be particularly helpful.³⁰

Drawing on the post-conciliar writing of Tillard, Wolfgang Beinert and others, Rush emphasizes the importance of beginning a theology of reception not with a consideration of doctrinal statements themselves but rather with the reception of the living Word of God by the community. Only in this way can we avoid the kind of reductionism that often attends to considerations of the reception of doctrine. Theological reflection on the object of reception demands a four-fold differentiation: 1) reception of God’s self-communication, that is “God’s revelatory and salvific offer in Christ,” 2) reception of the scriptures as the normative testimony

²⁷ Rush, 68ff.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 83-5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

³⁰ Rush, 178. See also, Avery Dulles, “Symbolic Mediation,” in *Models of Revelation* (1983), 131-283.

of that saving offer, 3) “reception of the multidimensional living tradition which transmits that offer,” and finally 4) “reception of the church’s doctrinal teaching which names the reality of that offer.”³¹ Any focus on the reception of a doctrinal statement divorced from the three other levels of reception is bound to distort the place of a doctrine in the church’s tradition. This *diachronic* analysis of ecclesial reception as an historical process which occurs within the developing tradition of the church must be accompanied, he contends, by a *synchronic* consideration of how this reception takes place. Rush locates ecclesial reception in twelve interconnecting “dialogues” which he refers to as *loci receptionis*:

- (1) reception between God and humanity;
- (2) reception between God and the whole community of believers;
- (3) reception between God and the Roman Catholic Church as a communion of churches;
- (4) reception between the episcopal magisterium and the *sensus fidelium* of the whole body of the faithful;
- (5) reception between a local church and its particular context in the world;
- (6) reception between local churches in *communio*;
- (7) reception between local churches and the church of Rome in *communio*;
- (8) reception between theologians and their local church in its context;
- (9) reception within and between diverse theologies;
- (10) reception between the episcopal magisterium and theology;
- (11) reception between separated churches and ecclesial communities;
- (12) reception between Christian churches and other religions.³²

As Rush himself observed, this combination of a diachronic and synchronic perspective bears an affinity to Herman Josef Sieben’s more focused analysis of the reception of ecumenical councils in the early church. Sieben had contended that the ecumenicity of councils was determined by a two-fold reception, the *consensio antiquitatis* as a “vertical” consensus between the council and the ancient heritage, and the *consensio universitatis*, a “horizontal” consensus with the teaching of a council and the faith of the churches.³³

I believe that Rush has provided, to date, the most comprehensive and mature appropriation of modern hermeneutical theory in service of a theology of the ecclesial reception of doctrine. If Congar must be credited with advancing the notion of reception as a fundamental theological category, Rush offers a developed exposition of the ecclesial implications of

³¹ Rush, 191.

³² *Ibid.*, 206-7. For his development of these *loci receptionis*, 331-58.

Congar's insight. Rush's project highlights the role of an overlapping plurality of ecclesial dialogues or conversations as together constituting the very dynamism of ecclesial reception.

C. Communications Theory

Paul Philibert recently observed that Catholic theology has now allowed hermeneutics to “enter into the very structure of theological discourse.... We are arriving at a moment in which communications theory will likewise become a shaper of our theological method.”³⁴ The linear model of doctrinal reception discussed above presupposes a primitive model of human communication comprised of three elements: 1) the message, 2) the medium or conveyor of the message and, 3) the addressee.³⁵ In this model, sometimes called a “transportation model,” a pre-formulated message is conveyed, unchanged, from the sender to the receiver. Yet this model has largely been debunked by modern communication theory. Where early communication theory focused on message content and media effects, newer contributions in communication theory have drawn attention to the interactive and dialogical dimensions of human communication.³⁶ Modern studies have noted that often the desired effect of an act of communication is subverted by the peculiar characteristics of the listener. In fact audiences vary in their “reception” of an act of communication depending on their socio-economic class, educational background, intellectual ability, etc. As a result, the transportation model has largely been replaced by a “forum model”³⁷ which insists on maintaining the dynamic relationship between sender, medium and receiver. This model privileges communication as a reciprocal act of sharing in which the listener actively and selectively appropriates that which is communicated.³⁸ It is not difficult to identify the similarities to developments traced above in the fields of hermeneutics and aesthetics.

³³ Ibid., 208. See Herman Josef Sieben, *Die Konzilsidee der Alten Kirche* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1979), 511-16.

³⁴ Paul Soukup, Frances Forde Plude, and Paul Philibert, “A Dialogue on Communication and Theology,” *New Theology Review* 8 (November, 1995): 21.

³⁵ See Walter Ong's critique of this primitive model in his essay, “Communications Media and the State of Theology,” *Crosscurrents* 19 (Fall, 1969): 462-80.

³⁶ Frances Forde Plude, “Interactive Communications in the Church,” in *The Church and Communication*, edited by Patrick Granfield, (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1994), 190.

³⁷ Patrick Granfield, “The Theology of the Church and Communication,” in *The Church and Communication*, edited by Patrick Granfield (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1994), 3.

³⁸ For helpful surveys of some of these shifts in communications theory see Gilles Willet, ed., *La communication modélisée. Une introduction au concepts, aux modèles et aux théories* (Montreal: ERPI, 1992); Denis McQual and Windahl Swen, *Communication Models for the Study of Mass Communications* (London: Longmans, 1981).

Many of the proponents of a hermeneutical theology highlight the metaphor of conversation, the to and fro dialogue between two participants which, if faithfully engaged, can yield shared truth. This turn to the dynamics of dialogue and conversation has been provocatively explored by Jürgen Habermas.³⁹ Relatively late in Habermas' distinguished career he became interested in the approaches to language theory associated with Searle and Austin. Habermas came to see the emancipatory power of human communication. It is only through authentic communication that we can overcome the alienation which is endemic to our modern world. Central to his work is the conviction that the very dynamism of language is to achieve agreement with one another, even if only on the meaning of what is communicated. The very possibility of language as a medium for communication requires that there be commonly accepted rules. For Habermas the dynamism of communication provides the key for understanding the nature of social action. Communication must be understood in terms of certain kinds of social action.

1. Two Kinds of Communicative Action

Of particular usefulness for us is his distinction between those kinds of communicative action which are oriented toward the successful realization of a particular goal (communication toward success), and those communicative actions that are oriented toward understanding (communication toward understanding).⁴⁰ The strategic form of action oriented toward success is quite consciously concerned with the accomplishment of a particular goal. It is strategic because "it possesses an objective other than that of truth, rightness, or truthfulness, namely that of 'effectiveness'."⁴¹ The second kind of communicative action, that which seeks mutual understanding, possesses no strategic goal other than the achievement of a consensus or common understanding. As such, communication toward understanding requires the following:

- Participants have to believe that genuine consensus is possible;
- There must be an equality among participants;

³⁹ Three examples of a theological appropriation of the late Habermas are Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Church as a Community of Interpretation: Political Theology between Discourse Ethics and Hermeneutical Reconstruction", in *Habermas, Modernity and Public Theology*, eds. Don S. Browning and Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 66-91; Peter Scharr, *Consensus Fidelium. Zur Unfehlbarkeit der Kirche aus der Perspektive einer Konsenstheorie der Wahrheit* (Würzburg: Echter, 1992); Paul Lakeland, *Theology and Critical Theory: The Discourse of the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990).

⁴⁰ This brief summary depends heavily on Lakeland, 46-56.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

- There must be freedom from constraint;
- Discussion and dialogue cannot be closed prematurely;
- Members must be given the opportunity to voice their views and demand the respect and attention of the others.

For the survival of any true community this kind of action oriented toward understanding must occur. Thus, the acid test for any community is not harmony but how differences of opinion and even division are handled within the community.⁴² When this kind of openness does not occur the mode of social action ceases to be action oriented toward understanding and begins to be action oriented toward success in any of its many forms.

Now while it is true that ideally communicative action is concerned with consensus, more often than not consensus is not a present reality. *Discourse* is the term Habermas uses for that practice which tries to deal with the lack of consensus.

2. The Church as a Community of Communicative Action

How might Habermas' theory inform a theology of the reception of doctrine? After all, his theory presumes that truth is arrived at through discourse and consensus. But does not the church believe that truth, God's revelation, comes from scripture and certain authoritative teaching organs within the church? It is true that this is the model of the church that has dominated the last five hundred years or so, but it is not the only way in which the church has understood itself. The neo-scholastic model of the church dominant before Vatican II viewed truth and revelation as coming from God through the hierarchy to the faithful in a top-down fashion. God's revelation was not discovered, it was possessed by the ordained ministers of the church. The church in this model was engaged in *strategic praxis* rather than *communicative praxis*.⁴³ The church had a mission to realize a divine plan which it already possessed. Consensus-driven dialogue was no longer necessary because the church already possessed the truth.

However, with the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic church has been able to recover an ecclesiology in which the apostolicity of the church, its fidelity to the apostolic faith, is dependent not solely on the apostolic office of the bishop but the entire people of God. The

⁴² Ibid., 48.

⁴³ Ibid., 113.

council portrayed the bishops not as masters but rather servants of the Word. By recalling that the whole church is the recipient of this Word, and by recovering such vital concepts as the *sensus fidelium*, the council opened the door to a much more dialogical conception of revelation as that which emerges in the faithful conversation of the church. This new ecclesial framework demands the rejection of false notions of the communication of God's Word. Habermas's communicative praxis offers the potential of further enriching this view of the church as a community of conversation.

D. New Studies of Popular Religion

I will conclude this second section by considering the contributions made by recent studies on popular religion. A number of theologians⁴⁴ have challenged academia's tendency to dismiss popular religion as primitive, a product of syncretism and rife with superstition. Rather, they would see popular religion as a "privileged locus of divine revelation."⁴⁵ Orlando Espin, one of the most influential Latino theologians writing today, would emphasize the culturally mediated character of all religious perception, learning and understanding.⁴⁶ Each distinctive culture provides a particular lens for making sense of religious experience. Popular religion offers a privileged perspective on this interpretive process because its constellation of myths, rituals and devotions are often found much closer to the people's religious experience than are the more sanitized articulations of religious experience found either in formal church doctrine or academic theology. Too often, Espin contends, theologies of tradition have focused exclusively on the decrees of ecumenical councils and papal statements. While this view cannot be ignored, it must be augmented by an appreciation for the way in which tradition is manifested in "the living witness and faith of the Christian people."⁴⁷ The rituals and symbols of popular religion can be bearers of the Christian Gospel, he insists, just as much as a conciliar decree.

⁴⁴ Most of these contributions have been made by Latino theologians. For some indicative texts see, Orlando Espin, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997); Roberto Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995); Alexandro García-Rivera, *St. Martin de Porres: The "Little Stories" and the Semiotics of Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995); Alan Figueroa Deck, ed., *Frontiers of U.S. Hispanic Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992); One of the first works by a Latino theologian to offer a positive theological assessment of popular Catholicism was Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexico-American Promise* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983).

⁴⁵ Roberto Goizueta, "Foreword," in Espin, *The Faith of the People*, xi.

⁴⁶ Espin, 17. Espin, in turn, has been influenced by theories concerning the social construction of reality developed, in quite different ways, by Peter Berger and Antonio Gramsci.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

One example must suffice. Espin considers the popularity of graphic, bloody portraits of the crucified Jesus in Latino spirituality. Often dismissed as one-sided, pious Christological distortions, Espin makes a persuasive case that these artistic portraits in fact offer us a rich theology of the vanquished Christ perceived by a people who have themselves experienced vanquishment.⁴⁸

The Christ of Latino passion symbolism is a tortured, suffering human being. The images leave no room for doubt. This dying Jesus, however, is so special because he is not just one more human who suffers unfairly at the hands of evil men. He is the divine Christ, and that makes his innocent suffering all the more dramatic...In his passion and death he has come to be in solidarity with all those throughout history who have also innocently suffered at the hands of evildoers. In other words, it seems that Latino faith intuitively sensed the true humanness of Jesus, like ours in all things except sinful guilt.⁴⁹

These artistic portraits are examples of a creative cultural manifestation and reception of the apostolic faith in a particular cultural context which seeks to make Christian faith and hope meaningful to a vanquished people.

One of the singular contributions of this approach to popular religion is the way in which it reminds us that popular religiosity both precedes and follows doctrinal expression. Popular images of the crucified Christ are obviously examples of a cultural reception of Christological doctrine at a particular historical juncture for a particular people. On the other hand we might just as easily consider Marian devotion in popular religion as an historical instance where the popular religious practices in fact preceded the articulation of doctrine (e.g., the Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption of Mary). This constitutes a challenge to the unidirectional view that it is the faithful who receive from the official teachers of the church. Often it is also the case that the official teachers, in the process of formally articulating church doctrine, have first received that which they teach from the popular religious practices and insights of the people.

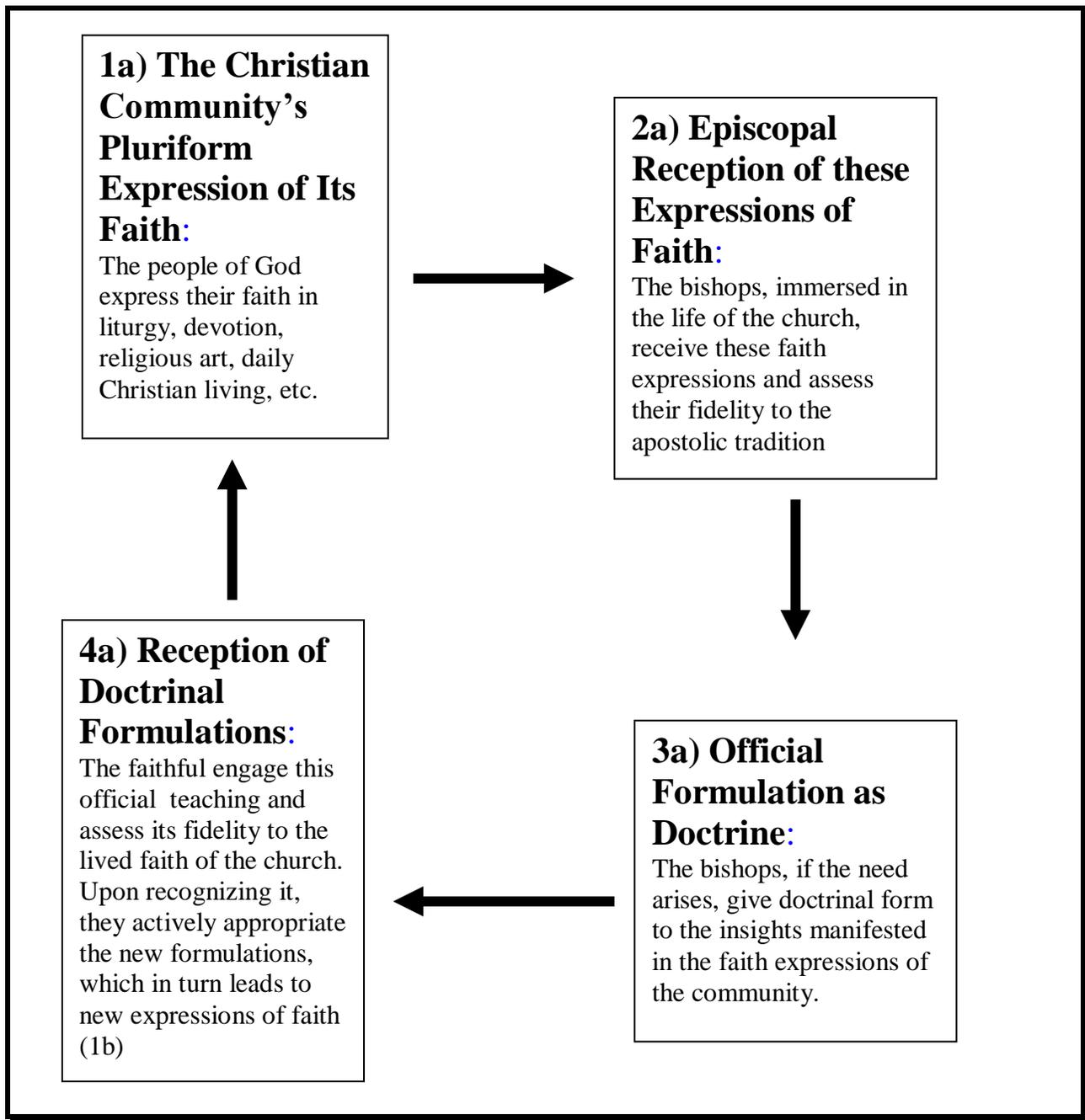
III. The Church as a Community of Reception: A New Model

⁴⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 72.

We noted above the demise of an ecclesiology of communion in the Middle Ages and its gradual replacement by a more pyramidal, hierocratic ecclesiology. This reduced reception to a unidirectional movement from teacher (magisterium) to receiver (the *fideles*). However, the advances offered by *ressourcement* theology, when augmented by the theological conversations with the literary and social sciences surveyed in section two, suggest the need for a new model for conceiving the relationship between doctrinal teaching and ecclesial reception. In proposing this model I am deliberately isolating one of the many *loci receptionis* identified by Rush, namely the process of reception that transpires between the episcopal magisterium and the *sensus fidelium*. I propose this model primarily as a heuristic tool to outline prescriptively the processes of teaching and reception as informed by the studies reviewed in this essay. It will be left for historians of doctrine to assess how accurate this model functions descriptively.

FIGURE 2: The *Communio* Model of Doctrinal Teaching and Reception



The central distinction between this model and that which dominated for much of the second millennium is this: the latter model presents a unidirectional trajectory that begins with magisterial teaching and ends with the obediential submission of the faithful; the former offers instead a spiral-like trajectory in which there are *two* vital moments of reception: the first

occurring as the bishops receive the faith of the people [from (1a) to (2a)] and the second occurring as the faithful receive the doctrinal formulation of the bishops [3a) to (4a)].

In the first moment,⁵⁰ we begin not with laws and doctrines but with the lived experience and testimony of the Christian community (1a). As Edward Kilmartin has observed, “formulations of revelation are a tributary of the concrete experience of faith lived by a community, whether this be in the form of dogmas or liturgy which crystallizes the governing interests of churches.”⁵¹ This suggests that the process of doctrinal teaching actually begins with the magisterium *receiving* the lived faith of the people prior to its giving that faith any official formulation in law, ritual or doctrine. The work of Espin and others has illuminated the importance of viewing popular religion not as a bastardized form of the apostolic faith but as a vital first order manifestation of the faith of the people that must be received by church leaders.

This first moment of reception is further enriched by the insights gained from Habermas’s notion of communicative action toward understanding. His theory puts a premium on the vital discourse that must transpire within a community and the “truth” that emerges out of that discourse. An ecclesiology that attends to this insight will view the church as a community of conversation under the presidency of a bishop whose tasks include facilitating the conversation of the church, calling it to public worship, keeping before the community its corporate memory (tradition) and offering the *sensus fidelium* of the local church to the other churches by way of his participation in the college of bishops. In this model what is often seen as a merely pragmatic process, namely, episcopal consultation, is in fact a vital exercise in ecclesial reception—the bishops “receive” the apostolic faith that emerges from the achieved consensus of the church (*consensus fidelium*).

This first moment of reception assumes a view of episcopal ministry captured in a remarkable ecumenical document, known as the Munich statement, that emerged out of Orthodox-Roman Catholic dialogue. That statement says, with regard to the ministry of the bishop, that while the bishop brings to the people both the word of salvation and the eucharistic

⁵⁰ To some extent, to speak of a “first moment” is arbitrary. The only truly chronologically “first” moment occurred with the manifestation of the living Word, Jesus Christ and the reception of that manifestation by his first followers and those to whom he appeared as risen. After that initial reception within the apostolic community, one cannot really speak of a chronologically prior moment in the four-step model I am proposing.

⁵¹ Edward Kilmartin, “Reception in History: An Ecclesiological Phenomenon and Its Significance,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 21 (1984) 34-54 at 52.

gifts, he "...is also the one who "receives" from his church, which is faithful to tradition, the word he transmits."⁵² Tillard, one of the authors of the Munich statement, writes elsewhere that the bishop, engaged in the ministry of *episkopè* or "oversight," is "entrusted with the task of *watching over* the way the gift of God is *received* and passed on from one group to the other, one generation to the other."⁵³ Thus the bishop becomes the minister responsible for serving the "memory" of the church. "The ministers of *episkope* receive from the *sensus fidelium* the church's awareness that something is needed for the well-being and the mission of the community, or the conviction that what has been declared still needs to be refined."⁵⁴

It is only with an acknowledgement of this first moment of reception that takes place on the part of the bishops that we can then move to the second moment of reception [(3a) to (4a)] as the formal articulation of the faith by the bishops is received and assimilated into the life of the church. Our understanding of this moment of reception is informed by the theological appropriations of modern hermeneutics and reader reception theory. We are reminded of the constitutive role of interpretation and aesthetics in the appropriation of meaning in a teaching event. When this active appropriation on the part of the faithful occurs (and it does not always), to the extent that it is an authentic and not merely an obediential reception, it will bring something new to the life of that church, particularly as this reception may well take place in a quite new and different ecclesial context. This reception of the faith in a new context may lead to "a fresh remembrance," a "rediscovery" of neglected elements from the tradition now seen from within a new horizon of interpretation, as the recent statement of ARCIC puts it.⁵⁵ The spiraling trajectory is in evidence as this "fresh remembrance" or "rediscovery" may in turn give rise to new expressions (1b) which may yield new official formulations [(2b-3b)] which in turn may or may not be received in the life of the church (4b). Indeed it is important to remember the real possibility of an event of non-reception, when a community does *not* make a purported

⁵² The Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, "The Mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity," in *The Quest for Unity: Orthodox and Catholics in Dialogue* (Washington, D.C.: USCC, 1996): 59 [II, #3].

⁵³ J-M.R. Tillard, "Tradition, Reception," in *The Quadrilog. Tradition and the Future of Ecumenism* [Festschrift for George Tavard] (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 328-43 at 336.

⁵⁴ Tillard, "Reception—Communion," 319; The Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue (ARCIC II), "The Gift of Authority," *Origins* 29 (May 27, 1999): #30.

⁵⁵ "The Gift of Authority," #'s 24-5.

expression of the faith its own. One thinks here of the early churches' non-reception of the so called "Robber council" of Ephesus in 449.

All too often, common understandings of the authoritative teaching of doctrine by the bishops presume a unidirectional model of teaching and reception that is inadequate and risks distorting our view of the fundamental ecclesial processes by which the apostolic faith is passed on in the life of the church. The model I am proposing here builds on both the contributions of *ressourcement* theology and contemporary theological conversations with the literary and social sciences to emphasize the way in which the faith of the church is handed on by way of a reciprocal dynamism of giving and receiving between the Christian faithful and their apostolic ministers.

IV. Conclusion

In his apostolic exhortation on catechesis offered early in his pontificate, Pope John Paul II highlighted the significance of the *traditio symboli*, the handing on of the creed to the elect as part of the catechumenal process. He finds in this ancient ritual a model for the catechetical ministry of the church.⁵⁶ However, in the new *General Directory for Catechesis*, the ritual action of the catechumenate is more properly described as the *traditio-redditio symboli*, "the handing over and giving back of the creed." The GDC offers as an explanation:

The profession of faith received by the Church (*traditio*), which germinates and grows during the catechetical process, is given back (*redditio*), enriched by the values of different cultures. The catechumenate is thus transformed into a center of deepening catholicity and a ferment of ecclesial renewal.⁵⁷

The GDC recognizes that the handing on of the faith is in fact a complex reciprocal process in which the elect contribute something positively, in their very act of reception, to the life of the church. In this essay, I have sought to amplify this insight by appeal to theological appropriations of contributions in modern literary theory, communications theory and the studies in popular religion.

⁵⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae, Origins* 9 (November 8, 1979): 329-48. See # 28.

⁵⁷ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, D.C.: USCC, 1997), #78.

These new studies have consequences for the way we understand the teaching office of the church. They suggest that the reception of God's Word depends not simply on a discrete teaching act, but on a particular set of communal relationships. When reception no longer means simply obedient submission but active appropriation it can illuminate the inter-relational foundations of ecclesial life. Terms like "reception," "conciliarity" and "communion," when fully developed and properly correlated one to another, negate any isolation of a discrete teaching transaction between teacher and learner from the to and fro movement of proclamation, reception, assimilation and transformation which constitutes the life of the church. A true re-appropriation of ecclesial reception will invariably shift focus from the teaching office considered in isolation to the quality of ecclesial life itself in which the exercise of doctrinal teaching authority can only be a contributing, even if necessary, element.