

Phillip Murnion – Assessment of “The Roman Church” Ecclesiology

In July 1999 Phillip Murnion, a great pioneering Catholic ecclesologist provided us with an assessment of “The Roman Church” ecclesiology, which is one of five typologies of “competing” ecclesiologies. Here is what he says: “Recently [the Roman Church] has adopted or usurped the term ‘communion ecclesiology’ as its own. It is the view of church that places its emphasis on the universal church, the Holy See and the magisterium, the catechism, and the authority of the church as located in the hierarchy. The local church, parish or diocese, is a subdivision of the universal church. As is true of both the cultural and the devotional (forms of contemporary ecclesiology), the emphasis is on the individual – the individual’s relationship with God, the individual’s relationship to the priest, the individual rite of reconciliation, the priest’s individual relationship to the bishop and the church, the individual bishop’s relationship to the Holy See. The sacraments are emphasized as effective rather than expressive, as the work of the priest for the sake of the people. The distinction between clergy and laity is quite sharp and not to be blurred. Emphasis is upon creed, code, cult vs. community, service, and social ministry. Catechesis is instruction. Community is valuable only in the sense of solidarity. The organizations of the church and their clear catholic identity and submission to authority are important – the parishes, schools, etc. This is a clerical church. Women are included and are in positions of governance of their own institutions but not in those that relate to sacramental, doctrinal, or canonical authority. Clarity is more important than nuance, coherence than diversity, doctrine than theology. There is an appeal to the devotional, especially to Mary. There is also a distance from any person or movement that challenges authority. Unity is the touchstone of this ecclesiology, a unity that easily slips into uniformity, for there is always some fundamental uniformity in any unity. Philosophical theology is more significant than biblical theology. There is strong emphasis on hierarchy and office. Participation with officials is for consultation only, not for shared decision making. The Pope’s role over the bishops, the bishop’s role over the priests and people of the parish, the pastor’s role over the parishioners are all kept quite clear. As is true at the other end of the spectrum, namely, the cultural approach, the emphasis is on the universality of the church and the place of the individual, now subject to the authority of the church.”