

From the Desk of Fr. Jerry

May 11, 2025

Avery Dulles was one of the oldest American Cardinals. By the time he became a cardinal, he was already too old to vote for the Pope. For most of his life Avery Dulles studied and wrote about the Church. His most famous book was called "Models of the Church." Dulles helped people think about how our ways of understanding the church have evolved over the centuries. The role of the church in the modern world was an important theme of the Second Vatican Council. It is also an important theme to think about as a new Pope is elected.

At a gathering of a church-based youth group, the speaker outlined the "models of the church" proposed by Dulles: **Mystical, Sacramental, Servant, Institutional, and Herald**. She then gave the young people time to consider which model best expressed their own belief. She then gave them an opportunity to vote to express their allegiance to a particular model.

The majority of the voters went for the Mystical Model. This is not unexpected. Young people are spiritually hungry, eager for God encounters, idealistic in their beliefs, and far purer in their hearts than those of us who have spent a few more years on this planet.

The next largest group adopted the Sacramental model because community and friendship are appealing to an age when friends are frankly more crucial than family. Young people make their sacraments as a group which cultivates a sense of belonging.

Not surprisingly, the ones who like to volunteer for service latched onto the Servant Model, insisting that doing what Jesus did is more important than talking about it. Once more, it's the idealism in teenagers that fires them up for service and compassion more than jaded and cynical adults.

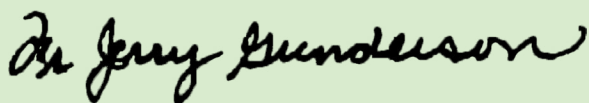
A small but fierce trio of young men remained staunchly dedicated to the Institutional Model, insisting that rules are rules and somebody needs to oversee the show.

But not one of the 70 adolescents in the room was willing to commit to the Herald Model. She asked, "Doesn't anyone think that the church is ultimately about proclaiming the Good News of Jesus to the whole world?"

The central understanding of the Herald Model is that the church is the people summoned by God's Word. We are given the task of bringing the Word to the world. Members of the church are messengers - evangelizers. Most Catholics are not yet comfortable in that role. The Herald Model prioritizes proclaiming the Word of God over building a community through interpersonal relationships. The church is not just where two or three are gathered but wherever the word is preached.

The advantage of this model is that it has a healthy base in scripture. It also provides a clear sense of identity and mission. Its weakness is that it under-emphasizes actions. By its stress on words rather than actions, this model fails to recognize the importance of the actions of the faithful after they have heard the call.

Whether you realize it or not you have a certain model or presupposition about what the church is supposed to be and about how the Pope is to lead it. This is a good time to think about the models of the Church proposed by Cardinal Dulles. More than ever, we need to make the Church effective in all the areas of our lives. The Pope can lead, but we need to do our part to make the Church better.



Fr. Jerry Gunderson