

## **The Pastoral Exercise of Authority**

*This article appeared in **New Theology Review**, August, 1997.*

Recently we completed a synod in the Diocese of Rochester. We planned in such a way that pastoral strategies for our future were first suggested by our people and their pastors at parish synods, refined at regional synods and finalized at a diocesan general synod. The movement from grassroots to promulgation and now to implementation has taken a great deal of time and effort but it has been well worth it. The synod experience has unlocked a tremendous storehouse of creativity and energy in our diocese. It did so because it invited our people to reflect on their faith and to identify ways which would help them to understand it, celebrate it, and live it more deeply. Through our synod experience, participants realized in a new way what it means to be called and gifted, to be part of a celebrating, searching community, to be contributors to the vitality and direction of the Church. The experience of the synod also taught me a great deal about the ministry of bishop and challenged me to reflect on the pastoral exercise of authority. I share those reflections here by (1) setting a context, (2) naming some tensions which come with pastoral authority today, and (3) raising some issues and questions for future consideration.

### **I. THE CONTEXT**

Throughout the whole of this century, the Church's magisterium has explored the meaning of authority in the Church. In each instance it has done so in the context of a careful discussion of the intertwining roles and responsibilities of the clergy and the laity. Popes Pius XI and Pius XII, for instance, placed special emphasis on "Catholic Action," which they defined as the cooperation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy. It was in this discussion that the millennium-old clear distinction between the sphere of the clergy and the sphere of the laity began to change. Clearly the popes were including lay people in their understanding of who was charged to carry out the Church's mission and ministry; and not just in the world but, to some degree, in the internal life of the Church itself. The by-product of this change was a new respect on the part of the hierarchy for the lay person who was seen less as one who needed continual supervision and guidance and more as one who was confident and able to contribute to the Church's life and mission.

When Pope John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council, many of the bishops who assembled had experienced the powerful energy generated and the remarkable results achieved by the laity involved in Catholic Action and other forms of the lay apostolate. Not surprisingly, then, in debating the original draft schema on the Church, they found that it did not correspond to their experience of the Church because it seemed to rely on an unhelpful understanding of the relationship between clergy and laity.

In drafting a new schema, which would probe the Church as mystery and explore its nature and mission with eyes open to the signs of the times, the bishops developed a more mature theology which took into account three basic elements.

First, the bishops developed a self-understanding of the Church as the People of God. After considerable debate, they reorganized the draft schema so that the Council discussed what is common to the entire People of God—clergy and laity alike—before treating the hierarchical structures of the Church and the roles of the clergy and the laity. In doing so they emphasized that, as a people formed in baptism, there is more which is truly common to all of the people of God than that which divides the ordained from the people they serve.

Second, the Council pointed out that the entire people of God has a responsibility to build up the unity of the Church and carry out its mission. It taught that the baptized “share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all in the building up the body of Christ” (*LG 32*). Even when there are differences, as between the priesthood of all believers and the ministerial priesthood, the bishops present them as complementary ways in which the mission and ministry are accomplished.

Third, the Council taught that it is Christ alone who is the basis for the common mission. According to the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, baptized as we are into Christ Jesus, all Christians share Christ’s ministry and mission as prophets, priests, and kings. In carrying out the ministry of prophet, Christians are called “to expend all their energy for the growth of the Church and its continual sanctification” (*LG 33*). As priests, they share in Christ’s function of offering spiritual worship for the glory of God. And finally, they share Christ’s royal mission of delivering creation out of bondage to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God, into “a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace” (*LG 36*).

Though in times past the Church may have presented an incomplete theology which seemed to define itself as a hierarchy over against the body of faithful laity, it does so no more. In the Council documents, the bishops clearly recognized that the entire People of God have full rights in the Church: to equality in the hierarchy of grace, to holiness within a particular call, to liberty under the gospel.

It is in this area of freedom where the Council made the greatest strides for it recognized that all men and women, as creatures called to communion with God, have a dignity and freedom which must “be respected as far as possible, and curtailed only when and in so far as necessary” (*DH 7*). Even more so the Christian faithful, since they possess the very life of the Holy Spirit, must be allowed to enjoy the freedom of

God's sons and daughters. Consequently, the Council urged that every opportunity be given to the Christian faithful "so that, according to their abilities and the needs of the times, they may zealously participate in the saving work of the Church" (*LG 33*).

The Council recognized the laity as having something of value to say to the whole Church. It urged the laity to use their freedom to speak the truth, always directed toward justice and animated by charity. The Council urged pastors to "listen to the laity willingly, to consider their wishes in a fraternal spirit, and to recognize their experience and competence in the different areas of human activity, so that together with them they will be able to read the signs of the times" (*P0 9*).

The Council recognized the valuable talents and charisms of the laity and acknowledged their importance in advancing the mission and ministry of the Church. So Vatican II urged us pastors to "confidently entrust to the laity duties in the service of the Church, allowing them freedom and room for action. In fact, on suitable occasions, they should invite them to undertake works on their own initiative" (*P0 9*).

In honesty the bishops admitted that they were not experts on every secular or religious problem that confronted the Church. Consequently, they recognized all the Christian faithful as having the "freedom of inquiry and of thought, and the freedom to express their minds humbly and courageously about those matters in which they enjoy competence" (*GS 62*).

Even in the area of conscience, the bishops reminded us that "the gospel has a sacred reverence for the dignity of conscience and its freedom of choice" (*CS 41*). While the Christian faithful ought carefully attend to the doctrine of the Church in the formation of their consciences, they are not passive in this process. Rather as disciples they are "bound by a grave obligation toward Christ the Master ever more adequately to understand the truth received from him, faithfully to proclaim it, and vigorously to defend it, never having recourse to means that are incompatible with the spirit of the Gospel" (*DH 14*).

This picture which the Second Vatican Council paints of the Christian man and woman come of age—faithful, gifted, articulate and competent—must be kept in mind when talking about authority in the post-conciliar era. The magisterium has once again reminded the Church of the gospel's own understanding of authority as service: "whoever wishes to be first among you must be the servant of all" (*Mark 10:44*). Consequently, the starting point for any reflection on authority cannot be a medieval notion of bishop or priest as a prince to whom fealty is due. Rather, if authority is truly service, and the Church has described what the Christian faithful are meant to be, then that service must be in support of that ideal. Whatever service is offered to the Christian faithful, then, must be in support of faith, in formation of conscience, in pursuit of holiness; must confirm and order the variety of gifts; must enhance the ways we carry out Christ's mission and ministry.

Most certainly, the Church is not a collection of individuals each pursuing holiness on his or her own. It is the People of God, the Body of Christ, a community of faith and love. In service to this community, a bishop must provide for good order while

still respecting the freedom and supporting the growth of its individual members. As a true servant, he stands in the midst of a community to give his very self as a symbol of its unity and a guarantee of its peace. He preaches and celebrates the Mysteries as friend among friends. Presiding in love, he helps the community to articulate its faith and reach consensus about its pastoral goals. He proclaims the vision of the whole, not as the lonely prophet but as the one who clothes with words what he sees and hears in the hopes and dreams of the people he serves. When disputes arise, he attempts to help each side to understand the other 's perspective. In serving the gospel while serving the gospel people, the bishop may have to set limits, call questions, ask people to respect necessary boundaries. He does so conscious of the medieval Church axiom: "in necessary things, agreement; in disputed things, freedom; in all things, charity." In every sense, his must be a pastoral exercise of authority.

## II. SOME TENSIONS

In reflecting on my office of service in the Church, I can name four pairs of truths which emerge from my pastoral experience of our people in synod and from daily conversations with the holy, gifted, well-educated people of our local church. These truths continually challenge me because they cannot be totally reconciled and must always remain in tension.

a. *Teacher/learner.* In the midst of a community of believers, whose greatest joys and most vexing problems are known to him intimately, the bishop must faithfully proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ but in such a way that all can give it a warm welcome. He is the official transmitter of the tradition who "is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously, and explaining it faithfully" (*DV* 10).

But the bishop is also a hearer of the Word as it is spoken and acted out by the Christian faithful in lives manifestly anointed by the Holy Spirit. For the magisterium recognizes that tradition develops in the Church not just in authoritative teaching but also through the contemplation and study of believers, through their intimate understanding of spiritual things. So the bishop must listen attentively for the Word of God in the words of the strong and noble; but he must also listen carefully to the hungry poor, to the women faithful in ministry, to the marginalized conservatives, to the alienated divorced, to the gay Roman Catholics in order to testify before the Great Church to the faith and practice of his own particular Church.

For some, among both the laity and the hierarchy, this dialogical notion is uncomfortable because it seems to deny a fixed authority which must simply be obeyed. But the Church from the beginning has used open dialogue in meetings, letters and in ecumenical councils to discover its faith and to secure its practice. Our belief is that the Holy Spirit is given to the whole Church and not just to the hierarchy or even one small part of the hierarchy.

Why then do we still act in ways that leave so many of our people feeling that we treat them like children? Why in their eyes do we seem afraid to consult them on matters of faith and pastoral practice? Why can we not trust that the Holy Spirit will

bring about a “consensus ecclesiae?” Why can we not openly dialogue about the ministry of women, the meaning of sexuality and the condition of homosexuality, the situation of the divorced and remarried? Why are bishops, who are called vicars of Christ and servants of local churches, so often excluded from processes which lead to pastoral strategies which will deeply affect their own communities?

b. *Timeless truth/manner of expression.* Pope John XXIII was fond of saying that the substance of the ancient doctrine is one thing but the way in which it is presented is another. So the Church recognizes that a bishop needs to proclaim the timeless truths of the Christian faith “in a manner adapted to the needs of the times” (CD 13). This is not a form of relativism which undercuts the gospel but a recognition that if one is truly a servant of the gospel and the people of God then one must adapt one’s speaking to the ears of the hearers, “making that faith clear, bringing forth from the treasury of revelation new things and old” (LG 25).

But if this is our understanding, why is there apparent apprehension about what seems to be legitimate adaptation and diversity? Why can there be only one English translation of the Sacramentary as if the use of English were the same in London, Nairobi, and Chicago? Why cannot the bishops of a national or regional conference be competent to decide on a proper translation of the Catechism or the Lectionary since it is they who are most familiar with the cultural and linguistic needs of the people they serve? Why cannot an episcopal conference apply the teachings of the gospel to the concrete situation of their own nation or region without the intervention of others who are unfamiliar with that concrete situation? Why is the pastoral magisterium so uneasy about the honest attempts by theologians to explore disputed questions in new ways, with new vocabulary, with new philosophies, in new cultural settings, with new data from the sciences?

c. *Local Pastor/Servant of the Great Church.* The one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ is truly present in the local church. Its bishop is “not to be regarded as vicar of the Roman Pontiff” but, in order to serve those given into his care, is himself a vicar of Christ who, according to Vatican II, has the full authority in his particular church “to moderate everything pertaining to the ordering of worship and the apostolate” (LG 27).

But no Catholic church is a church in isolation; each of its actions affects in some way all the other local churches. For the sake of unity and in service of peace, each bishop individually must have solicitude for the other churches. Even more so, united with all the other bishops in a college which carries on the work of the apostles and in a bond of communion with the bishop of Rome as its president, the bishop acts as full member of “the episcopal order [which] is the subject of supreme and full power over the universal Church” (LG 22). Though he represents his own church, he must also, in collegial unity with the other bishops and the bishop of Rome, “represent the entire Church joined in the bond of peace, love and unity” (LG 23).

It goes without saying that there can be considerable tension between the bishop’s local and universal roles since what may be good and uplifting for one local church may be detrimental in some way to the whole. Although the bishop of Rome

may limit a bishop's authority in his diocese in a particular way for the sake of the whole People of God, our theology tells us that he does so only as the successor to St. Peter and his ministry on behalf of the Church's unity. It is not uniformity that he seeks since he "presides over the whole assembly of charity and protects legitimate differences" (*LG* 13).

But in matters which do not affect the unity of the Church, simply its uniformity, why are the local bishop's hands so often tied? How can a local bishop faithfully serve the People of God entrusted to his care when in his and their judgment our insistence on the discipline of priestly celibacy has resulted in a dearth of vocations which may deprive the faithful of the nourishment of the Eucharist? Why cannot competent lay men and women, associated intimately with their pastors in ministry and teaching, be allowed to preach at the Eucharist?

How can the college of bishops under the presidency of the bishop of Rome be said to govern the universal Church when decisions about the content of the deposit of faith are attributed to them without careful and thorough consultation? As true vicars of Christ who represent the Great Church to the local church, how can they be asked credibly to defend among their people policies to which they have not contributed and texts which they have never seen?

d. *Sanctifier/One growing in holiness.* The Second Vatican Council envisioned the bishop as one who gives an example of holiness to those entrusted to his care through his charity, humility, and simplicity of life and fosters holiness by promoting the entire liturgical life of the Church. The Council particularly pointed out that he must exhort the people to "know and live the paschal mystery more deeply through the Eucharist and thus become a firmly knit body in the solidarity of Christ's love" (*CD* 15). One of the ironies of liturgical reform was that in being called to face the congregation once again, the presiding bishop was usually confronted with the holiness of the people gathered, the fervor of their prayer, the joy of their celebration, and the generosity of their lives. It was they who by their prayer and their lives exhorted him to holiness.

Implicitly the Council knew that this would happen. It taught in the Constitution on the Liturgy, of course, that Christ was present in the eucharistic species and in the Word preached. But it also taught that he was present both in the presider whom the assembly looked on and in the believing assembly whom the presider beheld. Each was to be Christ to each. In celebrating this source and summit of our lives as Christians, each was to call the other to holiness: for "all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity" (*LG* 40).

While church architecture in the post-conciliar era has removed the altar rail which symbolically divided the sacred ministers and the sacred space from the people—since now all are recognized members of God's holy people—other barriers remain. Why is it that men and women may publicly read at the sacred liturgy and may devoutly distribute the Eucharistic species as "extraordinary ministers" while men alone can be installed in the official Church ministries of lector and acolyte? Why is the diaconate, called a "source of all goodness" and a "servant of the mysteries of Christ and the

Church” (LG 41), reserved to men alone? Why does the magisterium seem to say that all are called to holiness but only men may symbolize that holiness to the community?

While Vatican II understands the Eucharist “as the source of perfecting the Church” (AG 39), it recognizes that to have its full spiritual effect the Christian faithful must take part “knowingly, actively, and fruitfully” (SC 11). But what if the forms and manner of celebration no longer speak to people? Why must the Roman rite with its mixture of ancient forms and medieval customs be the model that must be used to speak to Africans, Asians, and Americans whose symbol systems, cultural presuppositions and aesthetic sensibilities are so vastly different? Must our liturgical rites respect antiquity at the expense of the spiritual needs of the present?

### III. SOME ISSUES FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

Shortly after Vatican II, Pope Paul VI said: “To be a bishop today is a more demanding, difficult and perhaps, humanly speaking, more thankless and dangerous task than ever before” (AAS 58:69). The Pope well understood that the exercise of pastoral authority places the diocesan bishop in relationship with the Holy See and other local churches as well as with the clergy and people of his own diocese. To exercise pastoral authority honoring all of those relationships can be a most difficult challenge indeed.

Chief among the difficulties is the fact that the Church understands that both the pope and the bishop have real authority in a local Church. Vatican II taught that the pope “by divine institution enjoys full, supreme, immediate, and universal authority over the care of souls” and “a primacy of ordinary power over all the churches” (CD 2). His authority is clearly supreme. But at the same time (and this is a difficult concept to grasp) diocesan bishops are said to “exercise their own authority for the good of their own faithful, and indeed of the whole Church” (LC 22). “This power, which they personally exercise in Christ’s name, is proper, ordinary, and immediate” (LG 27).

To have two immediate authorities in a local church makes no sense at all unless, of course, the authority of the bishop is in actuality collapsed into that of the pope. But Vatican II stressed again and again that this is not what it had in mind. It set aside the notion that the bishop receives his power of sanctifying from his ordination but his power of teaching and governing directly from the pope. Rather, through his sacramental ordination, the bishop receives a charism from God which makes him a vicar of Christ and a member of that college which “is the successor to the college of Apostles in teaching authority and pastoral rule” (LG 22). Complementary to this teaching is Vatican II’s understanding that the pope’s pastoral authority is ideally exercised in the local church only sparingly for the good of the church or the faithful, on behalf of the Church’s unity and peace. Therefore, it could teach that “The pastoral office or the habitual and daily care of their sheep is entrusted to [the diocesan bishops] completely” (LG 27). *Completely*. This is a word and a concept that is yet to be realized.

I would suggest that the proper roles of the pope and the diocesan bishop will never be understood correctly until the church begins to live out more fully the

principle of subsidiarity. In his social teaching Pope Pius XI used the concept of “subsidiarity” to describe how all social bodies exist for the sake of the person, so what individuals are able to do, societies should not assume. Consequently, he taught that it was improper to “transfer to the larger and higher collectivity functions which can be performed and provided for by lesser and subordinate bodies” (*Quadragesimo anno* 79). Both Pius XII and Paul VI applied this principle to the Church with the caution that the divinely instituted hierarchical order had to be respected. It is in no way unfaithful to the Church, then, to suggest that the millennium-old centralizing process, by which much of the freedom of the local church to order its own life and worship has devolved to the Holy See, should be reversed. Pope John Paul II acknowledges as much in *Ut unum sint* when he suggested that papal ministry, always a service on behalf of unity, has “sometimes manifested itself in a very different light.” Consequently, he is convinced that he has a particular responsibility “to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation” (*UUS* 95). To hold that Christ intended a hierarchical order or a papal primacy does not imply that these will always be understood and lived out in exactly the same way in the life of the Church.

For example, it is only since the mid-nineteenth century that the Holy See has been regularly and directly naming bishops to vacant Latin rite sees. While no one wishes to return to the situation that preceded it in which the civil governments of Catholic countries directly involved themselves in episcopal appointments, there is a more ancient way. The time may be opportune to return to an election process which includes the prayerful discernment of the local clergy and laity in a manner that was honored in the ancient church by the selection of such great and saintly bishops as the former slave Callistus at Rome, the catechumen Ambrose at Milan, and the layman Hilary at Poitiers, France. As was usually the practice in those days, such a selection of the local church could be submitted to the bishops of the province for approval and to the bishop of Rome for final confirmation, since no Catholic Church ever stands in independent isolation.

I do not argue that such a public, inclusive process will necessarily yield better or wiser choices of bishops than the current process but only that the principle of subsidiarity demands it. I cannot promise that politics would not enter into such a process, only that the politics which will inevitably be part of any such process would then be subject to moderation by public scrutiny. I do not suggest a process which undercuts the Holy See, only a process that properly honors the holy people of God by involving the whole local church in open corporate discernment, a vast improvement over the present process of secret individual consultations. This recommendation is an important one, for this change alone would put into practice in a most significant matter what the Second Vatican Council taught about the responsibility of the entire people of God for the mission of the Church.

Of course, the principle of subsidiarity does not absolve the bishop from the obligation of hierarchical communion. A situation must never exist in which a bishop and his local church stand alone against the Great Church: “It is the duty of all bishops to promote and safeguard the unity of faith and the discipline common to the whole



Church, [and] to instruct the faithful in love for the whole Mystical Body of Christ” (LG 23).

Furthermore, it would be unfair to infer that the burden for the implementation of the principle of subsidiarity in the Church rests solely with the bishop of Rome. Each diocesan bishop must also ensure that subsidiarity is a principle at work in his own local church. He must give his clergy and laity a wide measure of freedom to discover the best ways of accomplishing the ministry and carrying out the mission. His curia must be seen as serving the real pastoral needs of the various faith communities.

In the same way that the Council documents describe an overlapping authority of bishop and pope in the local church, they also describe an overlapping of authority of bishop and pastor in the parish. Vatican II tells us that priests are “dependent on the bishops in the exercise of their power” (LG 28) and yet they are co-workers with him who “participate in and exercise with the bishop the one priesthood of Christ” (CD 28). The overlapping of authorities once again is solved on the one hand by subsidiarity (where the bishop interferes in the daily ministry only when absolutely necessary for the greater good) and on the other hand by hierarchical communion (where the bishop is joined to his priests who in turn are joined to each other “by a bond of charity, prayer and every kind of cooperation” [PC 8]).

#### IV. SOME CONCLUSIONS

Ideally, then, the local bishop should stand as a symbol for the Great Church of the fundamental principles of subsidiarity and collegiality.

The diocesan bishop must create in his local church an ecclesial environment which not only allows but encourages an openness to the discussion of questions alive in the church, even when such discussions touch on sensitive issues. And he must invite the Great Church to do the same.

He must encourage the faithful people of God to share their faith experience as well as their questions, concerns, and doubts courageously, knowing that they will be heard and respected. And he must invite the Great Church to do the same.

He must show patience with those theologians whose unusual methods or tentative findings seem at first to be at odds with received faith. In a careful, peaceful, open dialogue they should explore their mutual concerns while working in charity for understanding or resolution. And he must invite the Great Church to do the same.

With a deep respect for truth, he should dialogue with the members of the academic community in search of those fruits of scholarly research which illuminate revelation or facilitate pastoral practice. However, he must never ignore those findings which challenge the Church’s understanding of discipline concerning even the most sensitive of issues. And he must invite the Great Church to do the same.

He must conduct the life of the local church in openness, “walking always in the light,” eschewing all forms of secrecy, manipulation or coercion. And he must invite the Great Church to do the same.

He must do all in his power “to form men and women who will be lovers of true freedom—men and women, in other words, who will come to decisions on their own judgement and in the light of truth, govern their activities with a sense of responsibility, and strive after what is true and right, willing always to join with others

in cooperative effort” (DH 8). And he must urge the Great Church to do the same.

He must at all times and in all places exercise his authority as service on behalf of God’s holy people. And in the name of the gospel. He must insist that the Great Church do the same.

*Matthew K. Clark is bishop of Rochester, New York. Ordained a priest for Albany, New York, he **was** spiritual director of the North American College, Rome, before being named to Rochester in 1979. Bishop **Clark** serves on the Administrative Committee and on the Advisory Council of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops of the United States.*