# BISHOPS AND STRUCTURES OF ACCOUNTABILITY:
## AN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

When Margaret O'Gara asked me to participate in a CTSA plenary on Bishops and accountability I was both surprised and shocked. Not only is this a topic on which I felt I had no expertise, as a non-Roman Catholic I couldn't imagine why anyone would want to hear my thoughts on Bishops in the Roman church. On top of that, I received her request on the very day last June that the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. (my own affiliation) was completing its triennial meeting in Columbus, Ohio. This convention elected the first woman Primate in the Anglican communion, at which point a handful of U.S. Bishops announced they were going to seek alternative "primatial oversight" since they could not accept her authority. If you know anything of what has transpired in the Anglican communion since then, you will know that this was only the thin end of the wedge. The point is that issues of Bishops and their authority are very sore and difficult points right now in the Anglican communion—all the more reason to wonder why I was chosen to address this topic to you today!!

Margaret assured me in subsequent communications that my role was not to speak as a representative of my denomination but to create a broad framework for understanding the issues. So I set out to explore the notions of authority and accountability as they do in fact operate in community—any community—and discovered a lot that applies to both the Roman and the Anglo Catholic communions.

Since both "ethics" and "accountability" were in the title assigned to me, I started by spending an afternoon in the library. I reviewed theological dictionaries, encyclopedias, and compendiums of Christian wisdom. I sought out dictionaries of Christian ethics. In no case did "accountability" appear either in the indices or the topics addressed in the texts. Apparently "accountability" is not a topic that garners much attention from either theologians or ethicists.[1]

---

[1] I have found, subsequently, a number of articles that include accountability as a topic of discussion. Most notably, see Francis Oakley and Bruce Russett, eds., *Governance, Accountability, and the Future of the Catholic Church* (New York: Continuum, 2004). This collection includes the following articles: Gerard Mannion, "A Haze of Fiction: Legitimation, Accountability, and Truthfulness" (161-74); Francis Butler, "Financial Accountability: Reflections on Giving and Church Leadership" (153-60). See also Stephen Pope, "Accountability and Sexual Abuse in the United States: Lessons for the Universal Church," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 69 (2004): 73-88. James Keenan does a thorough and helpful review of the literature in "Notes on Moral Theology: Ethics and the Crisis in the

I had more luck with Biblical concordances and the Oxford English Dictionary. The Oxford English Dictionary refers to "accountability" as "the quality of being accountable; liability to give account of, and answer for, discharge of duties or conduct; responsibility."[2] Surprisingly, I did find one relevant entry in a dictionary of applied ethics—the section on the ethics of Accounting in regard to business ethics and practices. In this case, of course, accountability is about giving a reckoning for monies received and/or spent. Though the Bible does not deal with "accounting" as business ethics, several of the passages deal with the stewardship of money, most notably Jesus' parables about the kingdom (e.g., Matt. 18: 23; Luke 16:2). In these parables and other passages about the judgment to come (Luke 20:35; 21:36; Rom. 14:12), it is clear that persons hoping to enter the Kingdom will be "held to account" for their words, their actions, and their use of the gifts God has given them. In other cases, the compassion shown by God to those whose account is deficient, is expected to be mirrored in kind in our dealings with one another (Matt. 18:23). In the Old Testament, persons who spill the blood of another will need to "give an account" of their actions (Gen. 9:5; 42:22), while prophets will be held accountable if they fail to execute their missions (e.g., Eze. 3;18,20).

I will return to this notion of "giving an account" later, but first I would like to paint a broader picture of authority and how it works in community. Here I am relying on a short article by Bernard Lonergan called "Dialectic of Authority," in which he provides a phenomenology of how authority in fact operates.[3] First, "authority is legitimate power." Second, "the source of power is cooperation." Third, "the carrier of power is the community."[4] Furthermore,

> By a community is not meant a number of people within a frontier. Community means people with a common field of experience, with a common or at least complementary way of understanding people and things, with common judgments and common aims. Without a common field of experience people are out of touch. Without a common way of understanding, they will misunderstand one another, grow suspicious, distrustful, hostile, violent. Without common judgments they will live in different worlds, and without common aims they will work at cross purposes.[5]

---

Church," *Theological Studies* 66 (2005): 117-36. See also James Keenan, "Church Leadership, Ethics and the Future," *The Santa Clara Lectures* 12 (Santa Clara: Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education, 2006).

[2]*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) 1:85.

[3]Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "Dialectic of Authority," in *A Third Collection*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) 5-12.

[4]Ibid., 5. Note that these are *descriptive* statements and not *prescriptive* statements, which is to say that Lonergan is analyzing how authority and power do, in fact, operate in a community, rather than prescribing how it should operate.

[5]Ibid., 6-7.

Thus, authority is not something *handed down* but something *generated within.* It is generated within the patterns of cooperation that are concretely operative in a group of people with a common field of experience, common understandings, judgments and objectives.

This dynamic notion of authority does not mean, however, that we are over-looking institutions. But institutions are not "structures" or "objects" one can look at. Rather they are the roles and tasks that are passed on by example. They incorporate the customs that determine requisite qualifications and connect actions with their consequences. "So in the home and in the educational hierarchy, in the learned professions, in industry and commerce, in politics and finance, in church and state there develops a vast and intricate web of interconnections that set the lines along which cooperation occurs and uncooperativeness is sanctioned."[6]

So, one must distinguish between *authority* and *authorities*. *Authorities* are the persons who are assigned certain roles, who are entrusted with particular tasks. But *authority* resides, not in the designated offices but in the community that is the carrier of common values and meanings. Furthermore, "[i]t is the validity of those meanings and values that gives authority its aura and prestige."[7]

In other words, the values and meanings carried by a community can be authentic or unauthentic. They are authentic to the degree that they are the fruit of persons who are attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible. They are unauthentic to the degree that they are the cumulative products of inattention, obtuseness, unreasonableness, and irresponsibility. The important point, then, is that it is *authenticity* that makes power legitimate, that grants it its aura and prestige. Alternatively, "[u]nauthenticity leaves power naked. It reveals power as mere power."[8]

The distinction between *authority*, with its grounding in authenticity, and *authorities*, is nowhere better illustrated than in the Gospels themselves. Over and over again we are told that the crowds were in awe because Jesus spoke with authority. Jesus had authority, not because anyone had given it to him, not because he filled some politically or religiously assigned office. Rather, he had authority because a community of persons searching for truth and meaning recognized his authenticity. His authenticity shone through so clearly that even the distortion of evil spirits could not deny it. Surely, his authority lay in his relationship with his Abba/Father. But this was not because of some heavy handed designation of power on God's part. Rather it was because Jesus was abiding in God's presence—it was his *intimate relationship* with God that gave him authenticity, legitimate power—authority.

Likewise, it was the lack authenticity—the hypocrisy, deceit, doubleminded-ness, collusion with Rome, and legalism—that exposed the *authorities* of Jesus' day

---

[6]Ibid., 6.
[7]Ibid., 7.
[8]Ibid., 7-8.

to be clinging to mere power. In Mark 11:27-33 (Mt. 21:23-27; Lk.20:1-8) the chief priests and scribes and elders come to Jesus asking, "By what authority are you doing these things or who gave you this authority to do them?" (v.28). In a sense, these men are asking Jesus to be accountable for his words and deeds. But they are thinking in terms of authority as granted by those holding certain offices. In other words, they think authority and authorities are the same thing, and that power comes from outside, from structures carrying power-over. Jesus' answer, while it seems to be a question to confuse and muddle them, reveals the nakedness of their power. Jesus asks them to make a judgment about the validity of John's baptizing. He asks them to "give an account" of John's work, to make a self-commitment. They are caught in their own false views of authority from external warrant. If they say John's baptism is from heaven, everyone will ask why they are not his disciples. If they say John's baptism is from men they will be subject to the reprisals of the people, since John was held by the crowds to be a real prophet. In the end they refuse to answer, leaving Jesus to reply, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things" (v.33).

The meaning of this encounter is something for discussion and debate. However, at the very least it illustrates Jesus' recognition that authority is tied to authenticity and is recognized *within* community and not by external mandate. There is no short cut to authority. Either one recognizes authenticity and commits oneself to those who live with it—the true authorities—or one is caught in one's own tangled web of power mongering.[9]

Let us add to this analysis the notion of dialectic. Dialectic involves the concrete, the dynamic, and the contradictory.[10] This nexus of concrete, dynamic yet contradictory movements is visible throughout Christian history, as many papers presented at this convention have illustrated. I submit that there are two kinds of movements that unfold in community and history—the inevitable back and forth between institutions and their reformers, and the oppositional polarity between authenticity and unauthenticity. The first dialectic is simply a fact of life in community. Rosemary Haughton talks about it in terms of *formation* and *transformation.*[11] Others refer to the *organizational* versus the *mystical* elements in social life.[12] Old Testament scholars recognize the tension in Israel's history

---

[9]Note that Jesus does not dismiss *authorities* out of hand. He exhorts those he has healed to go and show themselves to the priest, and to undertake the requisite rituals (e.g., Matt. 8:4). Jesus himself clearly participated in the cultic life of the Jewish community of his day.

[10]See Lonergan, *Insight: a Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Longmans, 1957) 217. See the entire section here on the Dialectic of Community.

[11]Rosemary Haughton, *The Transformation of Man: A Study of Conversion and Community* (Paramus NJ: Paulist Press, 1967).

[12]See Barbara Barclay Carter, as quoted in Lonergan, "Authority," 11. Lonergan is quoting from an introduction Carter wrote to Luigi Sturzo, *Church and State*, trans. Barbara Barclay Carter (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1939) 6.

between *priest* and *prophet*. Studies of Roman Catholic priests today show a difference between priests who see their role primarily as *curial* against those whose ministry is conceived as that of *servanthood.*[13] These tensions simply reflect different dimensions and stages in a community's self-understanding. As many religious orders and Protestant denominations have learned, one needs both—the structures and the visions—in order to make a church.

Note that in addition to this complementary dialectic there is the opposition between authenticity and unauthenticity. The two dialectics ought not to be confused—the mystical types, the reformers and visionaries, do not hold a monopoly on authenticity. Neither do the loyal defenders of institutions. And, inevitably, communities are mixed up networks of those who live authentic lives and those whose *eros*, whose love for truth and beauty, has become distorted. As the doctrine of original sin reminds us, we live with a mixture of authenticity and unauthenticity, both of which are present in the community, the individuals designated as authorities, those who are subject to these authorities, and those who seek to change them. As the fruits of authenticity and unauthenticity accumulate over time, we have in history both progress and decline.[14]

Let us pause to see what we have so far, and how it applies to structures of accountability. My point in outlining this phenomenology of community is to make clear that structures of accountability involve patterns of cooperation that are concretely operative in the complex interactions of a community. Such structures are an inevitable part of any community, including the Church, and require some kind of definition, codification, policies and procedures, all with their theological justifications. At the same time, these policies and procedures, roles and tasks, exist only to the degree that they are concretely operative in patterns of cooperation. Structures of accountability depend only in part on the soundness of the procedures as outlined on paper. Their success—whether they yield justice, fairness, honesty, transparency—depends on the authenticity of those embedded in the patterns of cooperation.

A further quandary can be noted. The remedy for the inattention, obtuseness, faulty judgments, and irresponsibility in a community is hard to bring about. "There is no use appealing to the sense of responsibility of irresponsible people, to the reasonableness of people that are unreasonable, to the intelligence of people that have chosen to be obtuse, to the attention of people who attend only to their own grievances."[15] A climate of secrecy cannot be turned around by those who assume that all communication is part of a vast enterprise of conspiracy. Understanding and cooperation cannot be generated by those who think in terms of power as a zero sum game.

---

[13]See discussion and references in Keenan, "Notes on Moral Theology," 123.

[14]See Lonergan, "Authority," 9.

[15]Ibid.

Lonergan claims that this quandary is not irresolvable. In addition to progress and decline, he insists, there is redemption, and its principle is self-sacrificial love. Such love reconfigures the desires and fears, the hopes and despairs, that move us, and sets up a new principle of cooperation. "In the measure that the community becomes a community of love and so capable of making real and great sacrifices, in that measure it can wipe out the grievances and correct the objective absurdities that its unauthenticity has brought about."[16]

We are at the heart, again, of the Jesus story. Jesus' authority lay in his authenticity, which in turn was grounded in his relationship with his Abba/Father/God. This relationship led him to a prophetic critique that got him in trouble, one way or another, with both the religious and political authorities of his day. His authenticity led to his demise. "Authority" exposed as naked power only pushes authorities toward exhibiting more power, in the distorted expectation that their authority will be thus enhanced. The heart of the Christian gospel, both in the first century and now, is the belief that this victory of power is not the end of the story, it is actually part of the story. This is not because sacrificial love in and of itself produces new life, but because God wrests from evil its reversal, nothing less than life from death, meaning from meaningless cruelty.

So to the degree that our various Christian communities are exhibiting the effects of inattention, obscurantism, bias, prejudice, and irrationality, these crises can only be turned around through self-sacrificial love. But let us be clear about the nature of this self-sacrifice. More specifically, who is it that is called to make the sacrifice?

If we return to the notion of "accountability," note that accountability is about "giving an account." While there is a strictly ethical aspect of this—one's account is held up publicly against some norm or standard of conduct—there is also the background notion of giving an account—of the story one tells. In untangling a situation of confusion, hurt, misunderstanding, cruelty, and injustice, many accounts need to be given before accountability is rendered. If accountability in the sense of accounting for duties assigned or monies spent or responsibilities undertaken is to be had, one must first make sure that everyone in the story is "accounted for." That is to say, that everyone affected in the community has an opportunity to give an account—to tell their version of the story. There is an important principle here, which is that those in power ought not to be the primary sources of interpretation. There is a kind of epistemic or interpretive privileging of the victim(s) here. Granted, this principle can be problematic, since even the definition of who the victim is can be a matter of debate. (For example, an accused priest may be the victim of deceit or duplicity in a given case.) But at the very least, structures of accountability—the patterns of cooperation that make justice more likely—need to provide opportunities for all involved to tell their stories. In this initial sense, accountability is about *naming* as much as it is about *blaming*.

---

[16]Ibid., 10.

Note that there are implications here for the principle of redemption as self-sacrificing love. The persons who hold more educational, social, financial, generational, or sexual power in a situation can not be the ones to designate or define the sacrificial acts necessary to redeem the situation. Coerced sacrifice is not redemptive. It only perpetuates the evils it is trying to alter. Only freely offered sacrifice, grounded in love, can in fact become a principle of healing. Most often this involves kenosis, as it did with Jesus—a giving up of power or privilege in order to allow truth, healing, and reconciliation to come to the fore.

So what about the more strictly ethical sense of accountability? Here the issue goes beyond just getting all the stories out. In this case accountability involves, to quote the OED again, "liability to give account of, and answer for, discharge of duties or conduct; responsibility." This not only ties accountability to a set of expectations, attached to roles in the community, it also assumes some standard of behavior, a norm against which someone's conduct can be measured. This is the heart of accountability both in the Biblical sense (what does it take to get into the Kingdom of heaven?) and in the professional ethics sense (e.g., the ethics of accounting).

Just what are the norms against which one can hold Bishops accountable? First, of course, there are the transcendental precepts of human living in general: Be Attentive, Be Intelligent, Be Reasonable, Be Responsible. But these take on some specific duties when it comes to pastoral ministry. Being attentive means, first and foremost, listening. As a shepherd of shepherds one needs to listen to the experiences, needs, desires, hopes, fears, struggles and joys of those in ministry, both ordained and lay. One needs to attend to the parishioners and their experience of ministry at the hands of those responsible for them. Most of all, one needs to attend to one's own deepest yearnings and fears, lest some unbidden censor skew one's listening before it has even begun. Structures of accountability need to set up the conditions in which such listening is encouraged, fostered, and expected.

Secondly, one who ministers to ministers must be intelligent, in the sense of asking intelligent questions, asking the right questions of the right people. All good interpretation requires tools—one must do one's homework and research the sources on which one relies. One needs the tools of language, learning to speak the way the subjects of one's investigation speak—whether it literally involves learning a foreign language or figuratively includes the vernacular of the street, or the farm, or the factory. Thirdly, to be reasonable means weighing various stories, accounts as given, needs as expressed. Has one asked all the relevant questions of a situation or person, all the questions necessary for making a considered judgment? Are there some questions that are relevant but are being ignored? Can one identify in oneself the arbiter of judgment and its potential biases?

Finally, being responsible includes, of course, being in love. It manifests itself in distinguishing not only good and bad but better and best. It requires choosing value over satisfaction when value and satisfaction conflict. Minimally it means "Do no harm." Maximally it means promoting the honesty, integrity, and psychic health of the priests one is responsible for. Certainly, it means discerning

boundaries and distinguishing between the secrecy that harms and the confidentiality that affirms. In a Christian context it most surely will mean the love of self-sacrifice that promotes redemption.

Underlying all these precepts and expectations is the exigency to nurture honest desire: both a Bishop and his ministers must recognize and foster the deepest yearnings of the human heart in ways that are constructive, honest, provide safety and security, promote the quest for truth, beauty, intimacy, love, friendship, interpersonal understanding. In a word, perhaps the Bishop's primary task, the standard against which he should be held, is not orthodoxy—straight ideas—as much as it is ortho-eros—honest desire.

We can take these standards one step further in what James Keenan promotes in his recent reviews of ethics and the crisis in the church. Keenan insists that those in ministry, including Bishops, lack the kind of professional ethical training that is taken for granted in almost every other profession in our society (except perhaps for the academy). He cites in particular an article by Kirk Hanson entitled "What the Bishops Failed to Learn from Corporate Ethics Disasters."[17] The ten principles that Hansen elucidates in this article include, "Take care of the victim," "Express public apology quickly and often," "Learn everything about the incident; know more than anyone else," "Search for the causes of the crisis," and "Remove individuals who are responsible." These are yet more specific applications of the need to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible.

Let me add one other set of categories here before concluding. Over a decade ago Sharon Welch suggested a distinction between an "ethic of risk" and an "ethic of control."[18] An ethic of control assumes that moral action produces clear results and involves, "controlling events and receiving a quick and predictable response."[19] This decisive action renders one invulnerable to evil: one has a clear plan, a strategy that will not only rid the world of the current problem but protect one from further threats. This model of moral action relies on "the equation of responsible action and control—the assumption that it is possible to guarantee the efficacy of one's actions."[20]

In contrast, an ethic of risk is "responsible action within the limits of bounded power" and involves "persistent defiance and resistance in the face of repeated

---

[17]Kirk Hanson, "What the Bishops failed to Learn from Corporate Ethics Disasters," in *Sin Against the Innocents: Sexual Abuse by Priests and the Role of the Catholic Church*, ed. Thomas Plante (Westport: Praeger, 2004) 169-82. Cited and discussed in Keenan, "Church Leadership," 7.

[18]Sharon Welch, A Feminist Ethic of Risk, 1st ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990). A revised edition was published in 2000. The changes involve revisions to one particular chapter, "The Ethic of Control," where she had discussed the nuclear arms policies of the 1980s. In the process, however, she has deleted much of her earlier description of an ethic of control. Thus, the following citations are from the original version of 1990.

[19]Ibid., 25.

[20]Ibid., 23.

defeats."[21] This ethic attends to that which may yield only partial results. The goal of moral action is not complete success but the creation of new conditions of possibility for the future. In such situations, an ethic of risk engages one in a community of risk takers, involves strategic risk taking in the face of overwhelming odds, and recognizes the irreparable damage of structural evil.[22]

The point here is that, when things have gone awry and the common field of experiences, interpretations, judgments and objectives has broken down in a community, it is easy to assume an ethic of control. When we speak of Bishops and structures of accountability it is tempting to look for a system, a set of procedures, a nexus of tribunals, which will fix, once and for all, the evils of the past. While new understanding, along with new structures and institutions, need to be debated and constructed, it is important to be clear that the very best we can do is to set up the "conditions of possibility" for transformation. This is not a negligible task, and its work is exceedingly important, whether its locus is the Anglican communion with its newly conceived covenant amongst national synods, or the handling of priests, laity, and Bishops around issues of sexual abuse. But let us be clear that structures of any kind are only as successful as the authenticity and cooperation they concretely generate, and this authenticity and cooperation is often a matter of long term dialogue, involving kenotic humility and sacrificial love.

Let me conclude, then, by reiterating some salient points. First, from Lonergan: "Authority is legitimate power," "the source of power is cooperation," and "the carrier of power is the community." Second, accountability is about "giving an account" and it is of utmost importance that all voices are heard, all accounts are listened to, in pastoral ministry. Third, there is the strict ethical sense of holding one accountable to the specific roles and duties assigned to one's office, and these can be articulated, from the more generic transcendental precepts to the specific mandates defined by professional ethics. Finally, a key phrase is "setting conditions of possibility." Work at building or rebuilding structures of accountability cannot provide a quick fix to that which ails us. But it can set up conditions in which self-sacrificial love, freely offered, can promote healing and justice.

CYNTHIA S. W. CRYSDALE
*The University of the South*
*Sewanee, Tennessee*

---

[21]Ibid., 19.

[22]"The ethic of risk is characterized by three elements, each of which is essential to maintain resistance in the face of overwhelming odds: a redefinition of responsible action, grounding in community, and strategic risk taking. Responsible action does not mean the certain achievement of desired ends but the creation of a matrix in which further actions are possible, the creation of the conditions of possibility for desired changes." Ibid., 20.