

INVITED SESSIONS

BISHOPS AS LEARNERS: LISTENING TO THE LAITY

Topic: Bishops as Learners: Listening to the Laity
Moderator: Susan Mader Brown, King's University College
Presenter: Francis Sullivan, Boston College
Respondent: Catherine Clifford, Saint Paul University

Francis Sullivan, in his paper entitled "Listening to the Laity," considered why, and on what matters, bishops ought to consult the laity, and he described the ecclesial mechanisms currently available to bishops for so doing.

Lumen gentium (37) taught that "to the extent of their knowledge, competence or authority, the laity are entitled, and indeed sometimes duty-bound, to express their opinion on matters which concern the good of the Church" and the legislation of the 1983 Code of Canon Law (Canon 212.3) specified that it is "to the sacred pastors" as well as to the other Christian faithful that the opinions of the laity are to be addressed. The laity's duty to express their views to their pastors (presumably their bishop and parish priests), Sullivan maintained, implies that the latter have a corresponding moral obligation to be attentive. "[O]ne cannot affirm the right of the faithful to speak and not recognize the duty of the pastors to listen," Sullivan said.

Sullivan, taking Cardinal Newman as his guide, proposed that bishops ought to consult laity about matters in which they are "especially concerned" (e.g., economics, public education) or about which they have considerable experiential knowledge. Sullivan noted that Newman argued that the laity ought to be consulted on such practical matters since they had been consulted about a more weighty doctrinal question (namely the Immaculate Conception), although he noted that Newman's view was that it was evidence of the laity's broad consensus of belief (the laity's "supernatural sense of faith") that was sought rather than a doctrinal judgement.

Observing that "at the time of the Second Vatican Council, there was simply no institution in the Catholic Church via which members of the laity could manifest to the pastors their opinion on matters that concern the good of the Church," Sullivan described the structures currently available to a bishop who genuinely wants to listen to the laity. Some of these, such as parish councils and diocesan pastoral councils, have been highly recommended since 1973 but are not mandatory. The 1983 Code extended the available opportunities for consultation, he noted, by introducing new mandatory structures (e.g., parish finance committees

and diocesan finance councils), by admitting laity to previously existing voluntary structures hitherto reserved for clergy (e.g., national or regional plenary councils, provincial councils and diocesan synods) and, in the single instance of the diocesan finance council, by giving a deliberative vote on some questions to a body which includes laity.

Although new avenues for consultation have been made available, Sullivan remarked, it is nevertheless the case that “the opportunities for the laity to express their opinion to their pastors depends on the willingness of the pastors to listen to them.” The American bishops, for example, have not convoked a plenary council since 1884 and a recent study of Brad Hinze reported that only a third of the dioceses in the United States have held a diocesan synod since Vatican II. The Committee on the Laity of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops’ 2004 survey showed that only 54% of dioceses have a diocesan pastoral council. And even when structures are employed, delegates can be chosen so as to mute the opinions a bishops regards as unwelcome. Sullivan noted that in several addresses late in his pontificate, Pope John Paul II seemed to be encouraging bishops to make greater use of the available consultative structures.

Sullivan concluded by offering two suggestions for bishops who really do want to consult the laity. A bishop could structure his diocesan pastoral council so that the delegates to the council represent parish pastoral councils. Or a bishop could voluntarily deal with advice from his pastoral council according to Canon 127.2.2, that is, by not deciding against a consensus of the council unless there was an overwhelming reason for so doing. If this were the case, he would offer the council an explanation of his actions.

Catherine Clifford, in her response entitled “The Bishop as Learner: Listening to the Laity,” asked why ecclesial structures for consulting the laity remain so underutilized nearly half a century after the Second Vatican Council. She organized her presentation around three key concepts taken from Newman: consultation, competence and the *conspiratio fidelium*. With regard to the first concept, Clifford noted Newman’s conviction that the apostolic faith had, at times, been preserved better by laity than by bishops, and she seconded Richard McCormick’s comment that episcopal teaching is more readily received when the faithful feel that their needs have been heard and their gifts welcomed in shaping new initiatives. Why then, is there not more consultation of the laity? Clifford suggested that “an exaggerated interpretation of the bishop’s teaching office” which draws support from “a popular misconception of the doctrine of apostolic succession”—one which sometimes attributes to the episcopacy a sort of prophetic charism of truth received through ordination—may be the cause. In her view, “an important task for contemporary ecclesiology is the development of a more precise understanding of the charism of truth and its relation to the various charisms of all the faithful at work in the learning and teaching process of the whole church.” In closing, she referred to Newman’s observation that, when both faithful and pastors contribute to a common enterprise, more is achieved than when the pastors act alone. Joint action to further a common end (*conspiratio*) is a hallmark of the Spirit and would

address the frustrations felt by bishops whose initiatives are not received with enthusiasm and those of the laity in the face of “repeated clichés disconnected from the daily life they lead.” She concluded that “a more intentionally structured listening process is needed.”

In the brief ensuing discussion, the following points were made: the potential for stalemate when polarized factions attend consultative meetings can be reduced by judicious selection of representative voices; consultation of laity may be more widespread than we think, for bishops sometimes bypass what the Code proposes so as to be able act more freely on the advice received; it is unfortunate that the Code did not offer provide more opportunities for laity to exercise a deliberative vote.

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