

THE VOICE OF A PASTOR

I am grateful for your kind invitation to be with you to share some thoughts on the general theme "Voices in the Church." You understand, I am sure, that the following is no exhaustive treatment of a complex and controverted topic. It is my attempt to bring some basic convictions which lie behind my day to day pastoring of the Church in the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis. If I can make any contribution to the general theme, it would be that, the attempt of a pastor of a local church to share with you his experience in dealing with the many voices in the Church and also to share with you some of his successes and failures in trying to distinguish or discern what is genuinely authentic in those voices.

I don't want anyone to feel sorry for bishops, particularly this one. As a matter of fact, I enjoy what I do. I would suggest, however, that at least in the Church, no one is subject to the multiplicity of voices, all having a claim on his care, to the same degree that a bishop is. Some of those voices are gentle, others strident, even angry and bitter: still others are learned, anguished, authoritative or inquisitive; the one thing that they have in common is that they are insistent. Some are the voices of poets, some of politicians, and a lot are voices flowing from deep pain. What is primary is whether these voices, whether they be sound and learned in cultivated tones or in the accents of the street, echo the voice and claim of God.

By his episcopal ordination, the bishop is in a special way someone to heed the voice of God; his first job is to listen. "Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut 6:4). Vatican II reminds bishops: "The magisterium is not superior to the word of God, but it is servant" (DV 10). It is those voices which echo God's word to which the bishop, above all, must listen. But it is not only the echoes of God's voice the bishop hears. The voices of the world drum daily in his ears, that "world" which is in the Joannine sense a mysterious complexus of sin, injustice and disorder characterized by unbelief. The voice of God calls him to faith and service of the faithful; the voices of the world remind him of that missionary task which has been the vocation of apostles and their successors from the beginning. These remarks of mine are certainly to be about voices in the Church, but from the beginning, the voice of the Lord and his Spirit brought the cry of the world, the cry of men for help into the Church. Thus Peter in his vision was warned, "What God has cleansed, you must not call common" (Acts 10-15); Paul heard a pagan cry "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16-9).

In *Dei Verbum*, the second Vatican Council directs all the faithful, including bishops, to seek the voice of God in the Scriptures and tradition. The scriptural word of God must be a continual living source for the

bishop's prayer and preaching. A wealth of scholarship over the last seventy-five years has helped us all to grow in our understanding and love of God's word. I am convinced that this renewal of Scripture studies has been one of the main founts of renewal of the whole spiritual life of the Church. I would share with you, since that's really what this paper is to be about, some of my own experience in this. For a lot of years, I was pretty casual about the whole prospect of Scripture being at the base of my preaching. Under the influence of a good director, that changed some years ago. Perhaps the quality of my preaching has not improved all that much, but I am convinced that I am preaching more authentically God's word than mine and that's important. Another interesting thing that happened to me, as this was developing, is that I became very much caught up in hermeneutic considerations and I think probably made a conscious attempt to be more sophisticated in reading the word of God. I don't mean to knock that; as a matter of fact, I applaud the skilled, scholarly study which is being given to God's word. For an amateur like myself, however, it was important for me to remember that the Scriptures are given first of all to nourish all the faithful, including bishops. The Scriptures are practical, useful. As Paul indicated to Timothy, "for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in holiness." For me it is important to remember that the Scriptures are not meant primarily as a challenge to scientific analysis, but rather as nourishment for my growth in life in Christ.

The Holy Spirit, who inspired the sacred writers, is continually at work in the faithful transmission of the word of God. This is true of the past as well as the present. Through the presence of the Spirit, there is an evergrowing understanding of God's word. Tradition inevitably looks to the past. Those who have gone before us did not have all the answers any more than we do. Yet they, no less than ourselves, were guided by God's Spirit and, in their time, the voice of the word of God. With us they form part of the communion of saints. The Spirit, who speaks so powerfully in our time, was not mute before the twentieth century. The work of seeking the voice of God sounding out of the past is difficult, for it demands that we attempt to plunge into the consciousness of those who believed and reflected on that belief long before us. It is difficult to recover their presuppositions and their problems. Yet it is extremely important and liberating. We all too easily fall into the prison of twentieth-century presuppositions. We may attempt to escape into the future by imagination: but along with the fact that we don't really know what the future has in store, except that the sure judgment of God approaches us, we run the danger of smuggling our twentieth-century presuppositions into the future. On the other hand, memory is fragmentary and faulty. The Chinese proverb says "The faintest ink is better than the finest memory." Still for all its faults the gift of memory, which opens the avenue to the past, is more reliable than imagination. For here we are dealing with the palpable reality in which God's Spirit has been at work; and so of the voices that this pastor must hear, God's voice in his holy word and the voice of those in our tradition who have reflected prayerfully on it must be very important in my life.

Further, as we look to the past, I have to have my life and my judgment formed by the magisterium or the writings of great theologians. I also learn more and more that I have to pay special attention to the lives and writings of holy men and women through whom the Spirit has worked. God is saying something to me by the actions and words of people in whom he has worked in the past. He manifested himself in the lives of the saints, those holy persons through whom a personal God revealed himself. The faithful through the ages have had an instinctive sense to look to the lives of holy men and women and that instinct is authentically Christian. I might add, incidentally, that the communion of saints is an article of our creed. I really believe that it deserves more attention from theologians than it has lately received. This could be one of the doors into a renewed understanding of tradition. For tradition is not only a voice out of the past, it is the voice and vote of those women and men who have gone before us and who live now in God. This phenomenon of tradition continues under the power of the Holy Spirit in the Church today. God's people, filled with God's revelation, voice his word in their lives and teaching. They echo God's voice today as in the past, imperfectly as in the past, conditioned by the present moment, as others have been conditioned by past moments, limited in their human expression but true nonetheless. I will treat of this in a little more detail later in this paper, but I would only want to pause now to indicate that, at least for me, that whole question of being able to read God's revelation as he reveals himself at the present moment through his people is a good deal more difficult than dealing with the tradition of the past. I suppose that's because each of us reads the signs and symbols of our own time through the filtration of our own prejudices. Having said that, I would now like to go into the next area of voices which I must hear.

That would be my fellow bishops, chief of whom would be the Bishop of Rome as head. I believe fully the Council document indicating that the episcopal magisterium, that is the bishops united with the Bishop of Rome as head, is directed by God and aided by the Holy Spirit in voicing the word of God in their teaching. I believe further that the bishop in his teaching speaks "with the tongue of those who are taught" (Isaiah 54). But the bishop is not only the servant of the word, he is the servant of God's people, and the thing that I'm more and more convinced of is that I will only be the servant of God's people to the extent that I am servant of the word. The apostolic word of God coming to us through Scripture and tradition must be voiced by those of us who carry the "apostolic seed" in order that the Church may continue to discern the sense of God's revealed word. Then "the task of giving authentic interpretation of the word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone" (DV 10).

When people think of a bishop, they think of him as a part of the episcopal magisterium which of course is right. They know, but don't always advert to the fact, that he is also subject to that magisterium, and he, like all Catholics, is bound to accept the teaching of the episcopal college and the pope. Like others, he has to weigh the types of an-

nouncements and the degree of affirmation with which they are promulgated and then measure his response accordingly. Like all Catholic Christians, he must submit to the bishops' decision made in the name of Christ in matters of faith and morals and to adhere to it with a ready and respectful allegiance of mind. He owes the same respect and sincere assent as others to the supreme teaching of the bishops and the pope. I would share with you my own experience here. Rather than the sensitivity to the voice of the magisterium having stifled creativity in my own life as pastor, I have found it to be very helpful. Obviously, I think it would be a great mistake if a bishop's counsel came only from other bishops. On the other hand, I have found almost uniformly that I have made better pastoral judgments if I have sought the counsel of bishops wiser and more experienced than I and that frankly has become a very important voice in the life of this pastor. I would add to that that I have personally found, not just the major pronouncements of the Holy Father, but even many of his weekly talks, not only a source of edification but of enlightened pastoral instinct and they have been helpful to me.

Next, I would like to talk more specifically about you and your voice as it relates to my pastoral ministry. It is saying the obvious that the theological community speaks with many voices, voices which are frequently discordant among themselves and some it would seem with the magisterium. Often this discordance is more apparent than real. You have had a chance to hear or read Father Raymond Brown's address to the general session of the National Catholic Educational Association at its meeting in March which he titled "The Dilemma of the Magisterium versus the Theologians—Debunking some Fictions." I really believe that that general thesis is correct. I think that the apparent conflict often arises from varied methods or differing approaches to particular problems. My own experience has indicated to me that there is a good deal less tension between theologians and bishops than some people would imagine. Having said that, I return to the fact that a bishop must listen, understand, question, challenge when appropriate, disagree when necessary, with the theological community. In all cases, he must respect both the competency and the charism of theologians. For we know that teaching is also a charism of the Spirit. The final end of bishops and theologians is the same, a seeking after the truth of God's word to the greater honor and glory of God and the well-being of the faithful. Each of us will be judged on our accomplishments in our different roles. A bishop must respect and learn from theologians, whether their positions happen to agree or disagree with his, and he has a right to look to theologians to do the same.

It is not an admission of grievous sin for a bishop to admit that he rarely has time to pursue in depth the varied options that proliferate in theological journals. You know well how much time and effort you must devote to keeping current in the literature in your own field. It is not surprising then that a bishop will inevitably tend to rely on those whose expertise and judgment he has come to trust. I would tell you very

frankly that I am extremely fortunate in being in a diocese where there is a theological faculty of real merit. The contribution of those theologians to my pastoral role is very, very significant and that is a voice which I must hear. I would go further and say that I don't think that there is any other single group in the Church which benefits so greatly from the voice of the theological community as do the bishops of the Church. Our role as teacher must depend upon your contribution as theologians.

Let me turn now to the voices of the world. The familiar call of the Council to scrutinize the signs of the times is no small challenge to the bishop. *Gaudium et spes* reminds us that we must "recognize the world in which we live, its expectations, its longings, its often dramatic features." I think it's too early really to estimate the effects of the Detroit "Call to Action" Conference. In the American Church there were certainly attempts before to listen systematically to the voices of people. At no time in our history, however, was the same multiplicity of voices heard. It is not possible for a bishop to ignore that world, not only because the world won't allow it but, more importantly, because of the great positive potential it has to offer. The key to the whole thing is to figure out how you hear those voices effectively. In every diocese you have an increasing number of people, frequently as volunteers, making enormous contributions to the work of the Church. In dioceses of any size at all you have a bewildering array of people, some theologically sophisticated, and some not sophisticated at all, who love the Church, who want to serve it and, above all, want to be heard by it. In response to that, and so that there can be an appropriate forum for these voices, we have developed since Vatican II instruments such as the pastoral council, the priests' senate, sisters' councils and in most dioceses an enormous variety of committees and commissions working in the various ministries which any local church must incorporate if it is to do the work of the Lord Jesus Christ for his people. Now these things are all good and I really think that they are necessary. On the other hand, the multiplicity and complexity of councils, commissions, conferences and committees test strength and patience; they challenge faith and charity and sometimes make it almost impossible for a bishop pastor to have any real confidence that he is listening to the authentic voice prompted by the Spirit. You add to this, of course, that when the universe of discourse becomes unsettled, as it does in times of rapid change, the danger of divisiveness and polarization becomes more proximate. Organizational checks and balances can only partially cope with these difficulties.

Ultimately it is the power of the Holy Spirit and the charity which pours forth in our hearts which sees us through stormy times. The bishop must try to orchestrate these organizational voices, respecting their integrity, not trying to make a violin into a bassoon or a kettle drum into a flute. He must recognize competence, realistically admit diversity which may degenerate into dissonance, and seek the voice of God in the endless flow of minutes and reports. The amazing thing about all of this is that it can work. The key to it, however, is to make sure that at the front of your mind, as you listen to the voices, the question is continually

raised, does this voice reflect the deep, internal, Spirit-filled conviction that what is being said is being said that God may be glorified in his people. Because there are so many voices, the constant danger for the bishop is that he himself will not be quiet enough to hear the small voices, the muted voices, the little voices with which God has so often spoken through the centuries. Through bitter experience, I have learned that, if I am to be a true pastor, I must listen to the voices of those various groups of people who need the special ministry and care of the Church because of their particular situations. There are people, who for a variety of reasons, need to be heard and sometimes need to be prompted to speak. The poor and the oppressed, the handicapped, the unborn, the aged, parents in pain, bewildered and confused youth, overworked priests and religious; all must be heard, not just in order to know their minds, but more importantly, to serve their needs.

That list as you know is not taxative at all, but merely a sample of the voices which a pastor must hear. How, in God's name, is the bishop to discern which are truly echoing the voice of God? I submit that the general criteria are substantially the same as those for the discernment of spirits: one, fidelity and obedience to God's word; two, consonance with the faith of the universal Church; three, some sacramental link with the visible body of the Church; four, some dissonance with the world at large; five, fruitfulness. You can't set up an ink blot test every time a voice speaks, but generally, I think that those elements ought to be present in the voice if the voice is authentic.

To complicate the matter, it is important to remember that there are an increasing number of voices that would reflect what we used to call "those of little faith." There is that whole big body of people who are still in the Church, but at some point of pre-evangelization. The faithful stretch on a spectrum from the strong to the weak in faith. Not only does the bishop have a responsibility to minister to them where they are on that spectrum, but he has a responsibility to be able to discern where they are as he hears their voices.

And so, I would submit that those are the voices to which the bishop must listen, the voice of God, the voice of tradition, the voice of the magisterium, the voice of the theologians, the voice of the people, both strong and weak, and the voice of a world, often empty of faith, and yet a world to which, to the extent it is possible, must be brought the word of life and light which directs and supports us all.

The beauty and the consolation of the whole thing is that the power of the Spirit has always been sufficient if we are open to it. You, in your work, and I in mine, have the absolute assurance that the Spirit will be with us and will be sufficient to our needs. That makes your work and mine not only tolerable but joyous.

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