

A RESPONSE TO GILLES ROUTHIER

Gilles Routhier's paper rests upon an unspoken presupposition: that a theology of the episcopate (or of any other ministry, for that matter) rests upon a theology of the Church. Yves Congar, of course, long ago regretted that ecclesiology had often been reduced to what he called "hierarchology," but the tendency has persisted, for example, in the idea that a diocese is defined essentially by its being governed by a bishop, while what is called the "universal Church" is defined as the one over which the Pope rules. (A draft document in the US Bishops' Conference a few years ago spoke of a document as having come from "the universal Church." In fact, it had come from one of the dicasteries of the Roman Curia!)

The development of a concrete ecclesiology is impeded by this primarily ministerial and canonical approach. Intermediate instances of authority, for example, are regarded as of merely human law, and it is sometimes said that only the solitary bishop in his diocese and the solitary pope for the whole Church are of divine law. This canonical approach bleeds into a corresponding neglect of the theological significance of groupings of bishops of which Gilles has spoken. Henri de Lubac, for example, maintained that only the diocese had distinctly theological principles, while groupings of Churches were constituted by merely sociocultural factors.

But where ecclesiology is conceived as a heuristics of the genesis of the Church, those particular, local factors are not theologically insignificant. If they do not constitute the local Church *qua* Church, they do enter into the constitution of the local Church *qua* local. Without them, there is in fact nothing local about the local Church, nothing particular about the particular Church.

The genesis of the Church is always concrete. When the word of Christ and the grace of the Spirit come to concrete human beings and evoke from them the faith, hope and love that constitute the Church, it is not some Word of God in general that gives birth to the Church, but the Word as preached to and as illuminating individual and common human projects. The grace of the Spirit liberates from concrete sin, works reconciliation in concrete conflicts, raises concrete women and men into a higher possibility of life. The genesis of the Church always takes place as an engagement with the challenges and opportunities of specific times and places.

That is why I agree with Gilles Routhier when he says that the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity represents the most fully developed ecclesiology of Vatican II. Precisely because of its attention to the process by which the Church is planted, takes root, grows and flourishes in areas where it had not existed before, it offers a description of what happens, but is often overlooked, when "the Church everyday gives birth to the Church" (St. Bede) in long-evangelized areas. Some

such ecclesiological vision is needed, I believe, if one is going to take seriously—theologically—the kinds of groupings of Churches of which Gilles has written.

Second, to speak of the right and the need of regional Churches to preserve or develop their own spiritual, liturgical, theological and canonical practices and traditions is to require that they have the freedom and authority to do so. Perhaps the one area in which the ecclesiological achievement of the Second Vatican Council falls short is with regard to the structural implications of its vision of the Church. For example, the role of episcopal conferences was certainly validated, but the Council deliberately left unresolved the question whether they represent genuine instances of episcopal collegiality. In the last two decades, Rome has chosen a canonical vision of their responsibilities, both pastoral and magisterial, that follows the narrower view expressed at the time of the Council. The barren distinction between “effective” and “affective” collegiality serves only to assist the claim that this restrictive view is conciliar teaching. It is not.

Third, the sort of vision of the Church that Gilles has offered also requires bishops not to see themselves solely, or even primarily, as solitary figures whose essential relation is one of dependence on Rome, but to develop a sense of shared responsibility for a whole region or nation, and a sense also of mutual accountability. The dictum is often heard that “a bishop is responsible only to the pope” (with the addition, of course, that “the pope is responsible only to God”). It may be true that only the Pope can remove a bishop, and it may be true that no human instance may sit in judgment upon the pope (*nisi sit a fide devius*, itself a major condition), but these are very narrow definitions of responsibility, and there are other limits within which they must both exercise their ministry and other criteria by which anyone may judge them. When Pope Paul VI asked that a phrase saying that the pope is responsible only to the Lord be inserted into a paragraph of *Lumen gentium*, the Doctrinal Commission responded negatively, saying that “the Roman Pontiff is also bound to observe revelation itself, the fundamental structure of the Church, the sacraments, definitions of earlier Councils, etc..” There are so many of such elements, the Commission went on, that “they cannot be counted.”¹ And we would perhaps want to add to the limits mentioned.

But apart from that, bishops need to develop a greater sense that the collegial character of their ministry should mark their relationships within a given country or region. As Gilles noted, the young Joseph Ratzinger pointed out that the earliest examples of collegial exercises of episcopal responsibility were at local or regional levels. This requires a greater sense of responsibility for one another and of accountability to one another. An example might be the recent discussions among United States about what it means for them to practice fraternal correction within their own ranks.

¹*Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, vol. III, Pars I (Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1973) 247.

The bishops need also recognize to what a degree the effectiveness of their ministry rests upon conditions that are not guaranteed by episcopal ordination or by papal mandate. Newman referred to these conditions as the people's "admiration, trust and love" for Christ and the Church.² Antonio Rosmini said that "the principal cause of good effects in pastoral government is the love, esteem, and trust that the faithful have for the pastor who is to guide them to eternal life."³ The two great men were not making a merely homiletic point; they were talking about the actual existence and effective functioning of authority.⁴ There are good theological grounds, then, for maintaining that in their exercise of their responsibilities bishops engage in a certain inculturation to modern culture and society and respect the expectations of accountability and transparency that prevail today.

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²*The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, vol. 20 (London: Nelson, 1970) 430-31.

³Antonio Rosmini, *Delle cinque piaghe della santa Chiesa* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1999) 350.

⁴The sound pastoral and sociological sense that is inscribed in the section of the Code of Canon Law on the removal of pastors might usefully be extended to the ministry of bishops. One could even argue that it has been applied in recent cases in the United States.