

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR SOCIETY

Topic: Bishop, Presbyter, and Parish:
Historical Precedents and Current Challenges
Conveners: Peter Casarella, The Catholic University of America
Barbara Sain, University of St. Thomas
David L. Schindler, Pontifical John Paul II Institute
for Studies on Marriage & Family
Moderator: Barbara Sain, University of St. Thomas
Presenter: Paul McPartlan, The Catholic University of America

For this year's conference, the Hans Urs von Balthasar Society chose to invite Paul McPartlan, an ecclesialogist with expertise in Vatican II, eucharistic ecclesiology, and ecumenism, to speak on the topic of bishops in the church. Although it is unusual for this group not to focus on the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, the conveners agreed that the invitation of McPartlan would make a rich contribution to the overall conference theme of "Bishops in the Church."

McPartlan's presentation, "Bishop, Presbyter, and Parish: Historical Precedents and Current Challenges," focused on what the Church fathers and Vatican II say about the relation between bishops and presbyters/priests in order to cast light on the teaching (e.g., *Lumen Gentium*, #26) that the bishop himself offers or ensures the offering of the Eucharist in his local Church. In particular, it considered how this historical and theological development illuminates the situation of local Churches, especially where efforts at parish reorganization due to a shortage of priests are already underway. McPartlan began his paper with a consideration of the theology of Vatican II, particularly the understanding in *Lumen Gentium* of the Church as ordered around the eucharist celebrated by the bishop. Noting the council's references to patristic sources, particularly Ignatius of Antioch, he discussed the historical circumstances and theological vision shaping the ecclesiology of those sources. McPartlan described the relation between the bishop and his presbyters in the early Church, including how that relationship changed after the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century. Of particular interest was the shift in the role of the presbyter from counselor to the bishop to leader of the eucharistic assembly. He highlighted the use of the terms bishop, presbyter, and priest in the tradition and commented on how shifts in usage of those terms can indicate different understandings of the relation between the community and the bishop. McPartlan suggested that the renewed focus on eucharistic ecclesiology in the theology of Vatican II raises interesting possibilities for how a vision of the Church, ordered around the bishop in the eucharist, can be experienced practically in today's Church. While the eucharist is central in the life of the Church, he argued, the parish structure as it is currently experienced is not. The implementation of Vatican II allows for a review of current diocesan structures, a review that might lead to reconsideration of parish structures and more flexible deployment of priests and deacons in the diocese.

A generous amount of time was available for discussion after the talk. Some participants described the organizational structures of dioceses in South Africa and Nigeria and commented on the insights that might be gained from them for ecclesial

life in North America. Questions were raised about patristic sources, such as Ignatius of Antioch, favored by Vatican II and highlighted in McPartlan's paper. These questions addressed not only the importance of these sources in relation to other patristic writings and to Vatican II, but also the challenges of applying their theological vision in dioceses of the twenty-first century. Also addressed were the importance of eucharistic ecclesiology in Roman Catholic-Orthodox dialogue and the theology of the permanent diaconate.

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