

(II)

THE MINISTRY OF BISHOP AND THE CALL TO UNITY

The ministry of bishop in the church is always theologically defined yet invariably culturally conditioned. Culture in any age, however, is always very subtle, usually taken for granted like the air we breathe, and often only noted in its change or absence.

Against the backdrop of that fundamental reality, allow me to reflect backward by way of illustration. A major shift occurred, for example, in the early fourth century of the Christian Era, shortly after Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 which granted religious freedom to Christianity. Few today understand the price which bishops of that time paid for the privilege of freedom. Whereas prior they had been the primary pastors, liturgists and catechists of their respective Jewish or Gentile communities, the Edict made them civil magistrates as well. Without the support of either the Roman Senate or the Imperial army, Constantine turned toward those local grass roots Christian leaders for his political clout and power.¹ Almost a century later Augustine of Hippo complained about the amount of time spent in adjudicating local squabbles of all sorts. Such was in fact the beginning of the Caesaro-papism so bitterly contested centuries later by Gregory VII.

Today in our own United States, we do not have that tight linkage with the civil government because of our constitutional commitment to the separation of Church and State, but we have, in a sense, its opposite! The burden of maintaining ultimate corporate governance over a parallel set of modern philanthropic institutions devoted to education, health care and a variety of social services falls to the bishop, surrounded by coworkers from every related profession it's true, but intimately related to the exercise of bishop in this Church. Often a Catholic bishop arrives to be installed in a diocese and discovers that he chairs dozens of corporate boards, finding his life stretched to encompass all those realities as the contemporary form for episcopal ministry in a democratic society. Public scrutiny rightfully expects a level of integrity and transparency which consumes a great deal of time and energy. I say this, not to complain, but to underscore the specific burdens which a diocesan bishop bears in our culture.² This also is an often uncalculated price for our religious freedom. We are culturally conditioned in our own way, and sometimes in a fashion hardly recognized because we so take it for granted.

Today the responsibilities of a bishop within and in behalf of the ecclesial community are almost overwhelmingly vast. A simple review, for example of the index to the 1974 *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishop* reveals the outline for a volume of 116 pages, broken into 213 numbered paragraphs detailing the duties as envisioned by the Church's most recent self reflection during the sessions of the

¹H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

²The irony, of course, comes from the comparison of this modern social complexity with the early Church at Colossae, so beautifully described in the Epistle to the Colossians, but in fact numbering as little as two dozen persons!

Second Vatican Council.³ The bishop, as principal teacher, sanctifier and shepherd/coordinator of Christian life and of service to the needy, is expected to provide, either personally or through delegation to qualified and trusted coworkers, fundamental apostolic order to the proclamation of the Gospel, the worthy celebration of the sacraments, the care for the needy and the building up of the community.

In the *Directory* individual duties are specified and described in detail, each related to a fundamental area of episcopal ministry. This is a type of sacred order, a hierarchy, not of higher and lower (which is a serious misunderstanding of the concept and possibly mistakenly connected with the English assonance of “higher / *hier*o”), but rather a pattern of interrelated responsibilities given by the Spirit (1 Cor 12:4-13 and Eph 4:11-13) for the Gospel as lived and taught by the Church. Thus every baptized person is a member of that “hierarchy” or sacred order!

A preoccupation of the Second Vatican Council was to dejuridicize the Church and its ministries. For that reason, the responsibilities of a bishop were rooted in the sacramental action of ordination, rather than in an act of jurisdiction. An unintended consequence of the Council’s desire to root responsibilities in the sacrament of ordination rather than in juridic delegation has been the difficulty of true sharing of some pastoral duties with others. This is a serious warning to all of us to think through carefully the theological consequences and implications of the reforms we may seek!

I might add that the goal of ecumenism, namely the quest for the reconciliation of Christian Churches, and for the full visible unity which would mark that reconciliation, will be some sort of mutually recognized pastoral structure in service to that Gospel and its transforming power in human society. How to intermesh the theological and social systems of each reconciled ecclesial community will be a challenge in the future. Even now everything we do within our Church should be measured by its impact on our ecumenical partners.

I see two major challenges to the ministry of bishop in North America today, namely, the call to *synchronic unity* across the world “horizontally” (i.e., catholicity and unity within the Church), and the vertical / historical call to *diachronic unity* of this generation with the heart of our Catholic Tradition as received from the Apostles and lived by the Church (i.e., apostolicity and unity within the Tradition). In both cases the challenges relate to the ministry of social and communal unity as exercised by the bishop of a local church. It is the unity with Christ himself which will shape both tasks!

The Call to Unity within the Church

My own reflections lead me to highlight two specific aspects of the bishop’s ministry and service to synchronic unity in our contemporary North American

³Congregation for Bishops. A completely revised edition was subsequently published under the same title as *Apostolorum Successores* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), extending to more than 300 pages.

context, namely, within the local Church itself, and then between that local Church and the larger global communion.

These days we live in a very polarized society: ecclesially, politically, nationally and globally. The strong and sometimes bitter differences among the solutions proposed for the terrible problems of our age easily degenerate into rigid ideologies. That division is often apparent in a local church as well. Those deeply committed to holding on to the tradition firmly and securely are driven by fear of loss of something essential to our Christian Catholic existence, while those equally committed to the search for new forms and fresh approaches to serious problems fear the eventual demise of Catholicism unless it finds new cultural wineskins capable of bringing life to contemporary generations. A bishop truly attentive to the pastoral needs of the local church can find himself engaged in exhausting effort to bring the two parties within shouting range! It is inevitably helpful from a pastoral standpoint to find the right moment for asking the parties at the table, "What are you really afraid of?" The question, if answered honestly, can be a key to the restored unity we desire and need in the Church today!

The other aspect of episcopal service to synchronic communal unity is found in the summons to build up the larger Church's global communion of faith and charity, especially as we become increasingly aware of differing cultures and their consequent burning questions. It can be painful to discover that other parts of the Church not only do not share our perspectives, but that they even consider our concerns fundamentally flawed. Living in a truly global Church can be very challenging, especially for those blessed with the gifts of impatience and zeal for whatever reform might be closest to their hearts! A bishop, especially in North America today, is called to bring local and universal concerns to the same table.

I have a very vivid recollection of a panel similar to our own back in 2003 when the CTSA's white paper on reform in the church was first presented shortly after the tragic eruption of the crisis of sexual abuse. One of our respected members from an African nation arose from the body to offer a quiet caution against indulging in what was described as "ecclesial imperialism," namely the presumption that American answers to the Church's needs were automatically right for all other parts of the Church. I remain haunted by that comment, and therefore I am convinced that a bishop in our culture has an obligation to help his local church community to hear the voices of other parts of the Church global. The American gift for practicality and progressive change makes patient respect for cultural viewpoints other than our own difficult!⁴ Perhaps that is yet another aspect of Rahner's famous recognition of the new Catholicity of the Church, then freshly

⁴A volume which illustrates the challenge from a protestant vantage point is by Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). The same challenge is described from a very different perspective in the effort to explain the diversity within the Roman Curia and its differences from the American viewpoint by John Allen, *All the Pope's Men*.

experienced in the aula of the Second Vatican Council, which remains to be explored and integrated into our contemporary ecclesial consciousness.

The Call to Unity within the Tradition

By our theological experience and research as theologians we recognize the reality of the development of doctrine. Through the prayer and study of believers, and through the religious experience of believers and finally through the teaching of the apostolic teaching office that has occurred.⁵ Such legitimate development in the understanding of the apostolic faith, however, can only occur when the believers are themselves rooted in the Catholic tradition. Thus I come to my second major challenge for a bishop in North America today.

Our contemporary Catholic experience is deeply wounded by the pressing need for adult formation across all ages at the parish level. Endless surveys and studies document the serious religious illiteracy among so many portions of our Catholic population. Far too often parents become volunteers to teach catechism without knowing the Catholic tradition which they purport to hand on. Far too often prospective teachers, even at our Catholic colleges and universities, take an assortment of courses by reason of the popularity of the instructor, personal interest in the topic or the convenience of the class time, and then graduate without any sense of the cohesive theological texture of our faith. Thus often our teachers and catechists have not had the opportunity to understand the total tissue of the faith nor its "hierarchy of truths" (in the original sense of the term). Helping our adults become reintegrated into the living tradition of our Catholic faith is yet another urgent aspect of the diachronic episcopal ministry to a local church.

Newspapers often identify Catholics by a short litmus list of moral positions without communicating the rich history of moral reasoning which has shaped our thinking about the vexing questions of our age in North America. A foundational conviction that "the end doesn't justify the means," for example, or that "even the most difficult of human situations must not be resolved by simply eliminating the weakest person present," has not made its way into the thinking of our people, young and elder alike.

Conclusion

Finally, perhaps by way of summary, I would quote a small plaque attached to the wall of Rochester Cathedral, near its Cathedra. The quaint historic town, situated some thirty miles east of London, is the second oldest diocese in the United Kingdom, founded by St. Augustine in 604 AD. Rochester is the church over which John Fisher presided during the turbulent days of Henry VII. The inscription says simply: "*It is the duty of the bishop as successor to the Apostles, to speak in the name of God, to interpret the teaching of Christ, to maintain and further the unity of the Church, to be merciful in upholding its discipline, and to guard the faith.*"

⁵*Dei Verbum*, §12.

Lacking in that summary, perhaps as a result of the tragic schism initiated by Henry's actions, is an explicit concern for the larger unity of the global Church Catholic. Amid the paradoxical and sometimes mutually contradictory claims of nationalization and globalization in our entire contemporary society, that "solicitude for all the Churches" (2 Cor 11:28) must not be lost from the purview of any bishop, no matter how preoccupied he may be with the heartaches of any given local church. The quest for unity in every direction remains, I am convinced, the fundamental task of the North American bishop in the Church today!

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