

EVER ANCIENT EVER NEW—SELECTED SESSION

- Topic: Book Discussion —*Ever Ancient, Ever New: Structures of Communion in the Church* (Paulist 2013) by Archbishop John R. Quinn
- Convener: Paul G. Crowley, S.J., Santa Clara University
- Moderator: Brian Flanagan, Marymount University
- Presenters: Joseph Komonchak, Emeritus, Catholic University of America  
Amanda Osheim, Loras College
- Respondent: Archbishop John R. Quinn, Emeritus, San Francisco

This panel followed a symposium at Stanford University held in March 2013 on the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, at which Archbishop Quinn spoke to themes in this book, not then published. Almost simultaneously, the election of Pope Francis gave rise to wider discussion of the structural implications of a communion ecclesiology stressing decentralization of Roman authority, synodality, and reform of the exercise of the Petrine ministry—the latter already called for by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

Professor Komonchak helpfully summarized the movement of the book: “It begins at the very local level of communion among the earliest churches with the so-called Council of Jerusalem, an instance of a structure for resolving difficulties among them. It then moves successively to the emergence of local or regional synods for dealing with common problems, to the emergence of metropolitan and then patriarchal synods, to the question whether modern patriarchates should be encouraged and established, to the role a Synod of Bishops with deliberative power might play. It concludes with ‘the pre-eminent structures of communion, ecumenical councils.’ So the movement is from the local or particular to the general or universal.”

Professor Osheim led the discussion with a set of rich observations about the office and person of the local bishop, asking how he can serve as a minister for communion in the local church and among the churches, and then what structures might serve to help him in this ministry. The thread running through these observations was that the bishop be a person “for whom discernment is virtuously habitual and transformative, a person who is able to believe, feel, think, and act in ways” faithful to Christ and the life of the local church. There is need, then, for an episcopal spirituality. This need calls for a broader understanding of church, much in keeping with Quinn’s vision, where patterns of discernment are fostered by the bishop in a communion of ministers. Leaning on Newman’s *Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, Osheim limned a vision of “dialogical discernment” where the teacher-bishop is also a learner as he discerns the movements of the Spirit among the people of the local church. In response, Quinn specified what it is that we are discerning—the ways God is at work, even in the smallest parts of our lives. (He illustrated his point with the charming example of a snail.)

Among the structures Osheim discussed to advance a culture of discernment were the parish and diocesan pastoral councils, unevenly utilized since the time of the Second Vatican Council. But a major role for these kinds of structures, beyond governance, should be care for the person of the bishop. Agreeing, Quinn honestly

spoke of the overwhelming challenges bishops face. Tensions between the “office” and the “person” identified by Osheim were frankly exposed.

In an irenic spirit, Komonchak offered three critiques. First, the book attends to the structures of the episcopacy but pays less attention to the local and diocesan levels of Church governance, hence also deemphasizing the role of the laity in addressing the topic at hand. Yet problems abound in the governance of the Church at these levels, with many, laity and priests included, sometimes finding themselves powerless. Quinn said that he was sympathetic to this concern, which he has addressed in other works.

A further observation came in the form of a question: “What is collegiality?” In the conciliar debates Josef Ratzinger distinguished between the modern and patristic approaches. The former aligns with a juridical, nation-state model focused on pope and bishop, while the latter begins with the individual local church, “seen not as a ‘part’ of the universal church but as truly a realization of the church in a particular place.” The latter model is to be favored, but it presents several challenges in uniting churches for consultation and decision-making. Quinn’s thesis favors the patristic model and the development of the local churches in communion with one another, ultimately in synods. Komonchak, concurring, nevertheless warned of the Roman synods that “we should be careful not to let the Synod, particularly if it is conceived as an instrument for the governance of the whole Church, simply substitute a quasi-parliamentary body for a monarch’s bureaucracy.” Emphasis must remain at the local level.

A final observation concerned Quinn’s use of the much confuted “*subsistit in*.” The ensuing dialogue between Quinn and Komonchak on this question modeled theological conversation and the arrival of a common ground of understanding, in this case, located in the Council’s Decree on Ecumenism. In light of the convention’s focus on theological diversity and disagreement, this conversation’s salutary contribution should have been witnessed by all.

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