

## THE CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES

Topic: Episcopal Leadership and the Church in the United States  
Convener  
and Moderator: William A. Clark, College of the Holy Cross  
Presenter: Richard Gaillardetz, University of Toledo  
Respondents: Eileen Burke-Sullivan, Creighton University  
J. Michael Byron, University of St. Thomas  
Joseph Hartzler, Franciscan School of Theology  
Phyllis Zagano, Hofstra University

Over the past four years, “The Church in the United States” developing group has taken a contextual approach to practical ecclesiological problems within the U.S. church. The 2007 CTSA convention marked the last of our group’s sessions. Previous sessions have followed convention themes and focused on “Reconciliation in U.S. Catholicism,” “Body, Community, and Resurrection,” and “Dialogues, Tensions, and Seeds of Hope.” This year’s theme, “Bishops in the Church,” offered the opportunity for a fitting conclusion, focusing on the dimension of episcopal leadership in the U.S. church as it faces the various crises and challenges that have been discussed in previous years.

Following a somewhat different format from the previous three, this session consisted of a single main presenter, Richard Gaillardetz, Murray/Bacik Professor of Catholic Studies at the University of Toledo, author of the recent book *The Church in the Making* (Paulist, 2006). Gaillardetz developed the thesis “that the particular shape of episcopal ministry in the American church today is a direct consequence of the U.S. church’s particular reception of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the episcopate.” In three sections, his paper examined what he considers to be the basic contributions of the council’s teaching regarding the office of bishop, the ambiguities left by the council’s teaching, and the ways in which post-conciliar developments in the American church are marked by both. Among the most important conciliar contributions, Gaillardetz includes “the council’s emphasis on the proper autonomy of the bishop as pastoral leader of his flock and the unity of all the bishops with the pope in the exercise of authority over the whole church.” Among the ambiguities of the teaching, he discusses the relationship of the bishop to both the episcopal college and the local church and the relationship between episcopal collegiality and papal primacy.

Gaillardetz sees the fruit of the American reception of the council’s teaching in the dynamic renewal of parish life that occurred in the decades following the council, and in the activist stance of the U.S. episcopal conference toward a number of important social issues into the 1980’s. The discussion of the council’s impact at the 1985 extraordinary synod of bishops, however, marked the beginning of a significant change in attitude that has been adopted by many of the newer generation of American bishops in the years since. This reconsidered ecclesiology has given priority to the bishops’ relationship to the universal church over the local church, and leaves the impression that the mediating role of the bishop moves in only one direction, “*from Rome to the local church.*” Gaillardetz sees in this the genesis of another recent characteristic of U.S. episcopal leadership, “the failure to

see the bishop as servant of the catholicity of the church,” since the gifts of local churches are often neglected in the predominantly universalist emphasis. Likewise, the focus on the preeminence of Rome has led to a loss of vigor in the once-promising development of episcopal conferences as an expression of collegiality. Gaillardetz concluded by predicting that “until the current imbalance in these relationships is rectified we will continue to struggle with an American episcopate with eyes fixed beyond the ocean and not on the work of the Spirit so evident in their own local churches.”

Four brief responses followed Gaillardetz’s paper. Phyllis Zagano underscored the shift in U.S. episcopal attitude by offering examples of how “the priorities of Rome-educated, Rome-oriented, and professorial U.S. diocesan bishops replace the preferences of the previous generation,” many of whom were trained and experienced as pastors and social workers. J. Michael Byron briefly recounted the recent history of his home diocese by way of illustrating the same shift in attitude and, describing an anxiety he encounters in many Catholics there today, asked, “How do we find ourselves in a place not merely of the bishop being seen as ‘aloof and distant’ . . . but even scary to some?” Joseph Hartzler pointed out that when the unity and apostolicity of the church come at the expense of its catholicity, local communities that do not have their contributions acknowledged tend to move emotionally away from the bishop, and so away from unity. Eileen Burke-Sullivan called for structures of participation that could address the asymmetry between the local and the universal church. The loss of uniformity, an emphasis on “ecclesiologies” rather than on the “doctrine of church,” could be welcomed as an opportunity for the “plural face” of the Spirit to be seen.

The session concluded with a sustained and lively discussion among the approximately forty-five CTSA members in attendance.

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