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# Church, Hierarchy and Churches: Popular Catholic Misconceptions

By THOMAS P. RAUSCH

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**I**N JANUARY 1991 Archbishop Rembert Weakland, O.S.B., of Milwaukee made headlines when he published the draft of a pastoral letter for his archdiocese. In it he stated his willingness to present to Rome a married male candidate for ordination to the priesthood—when a Catholic community that met certain conditions of faith and vitality was not able to find a celibate priest.

His proposal was carefully circumscribed. As he said later, it was to be “only in extreme necessity and under very rigid conditions.” Nevertheless, his raising this issue was apparently too much for the Vatican. When the final draft of his pastoral letter was published on Nov. 7, 1991, the Archbishop disclosed that the Vatican Secretary of State had termed his proposal for priest-short areas and communities “out of place.”

Archbishop Weakland is not the only bishop to have raised the issue of celibacy lately. About the time that his pastoral letter was published, two bishops in Germany also brought up the question. Berlin’s Cardinal Georg Sterzinsky suggested that the possibility of married priests in the third millennium could not be excluded. Walter Kasper, Bishop of Rottenburg, said in a radio interview that married priests would bring a new dimension of experience to the Catholic clergy. Both bishops “clarified” their statements a day later, explaining that they had not meant to present any views different from the Vatican’s official position.

The issue raised by these bishops—the increasingly critical shortage of priests—is only one of many facing the Roman Catholic Church today. These issues need to be discussed openly. Unfortunately, it is too often the case that episcopal efforts to raise these issues are discouraged.

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One such effort, the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on women, after several Roman interventions, was revised in its fourth draft into insignificance. At least two bishops described the latest draft as sexist, and on Nov. 18 the proposed letter failed to get the necessary vote of the U.S. bishops (see Report, p. 443).

No doubt the bishops are feeling considerably frustrated. Unable to discuss openly the issues that most concern them or to make suggestions, the bishops are often reduced to placing on their agendas topics that will not get them into trouble with Rome. They must also spend their energies on damage control of offensive Roman statements like the recent document sent to them by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (C.D.F.) justifying in certain cases discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (see AM., 9/12/92).

Lay Catholics have even fewer opportunities to shape church policy or to influence its decision-making processes. A recent survey of lay Catholics, analyzed in *American Catholic Laity in a Changing Church* (ed. William D'Antonio, 1989), reported a growing disagreement between church leaders and the laity on questions such as birth control, divorce and remarriage, abortion (to a lesser extent) and the ordination of women. The survey found that the majority of lay Catholics are consistently in favor of democratic decision-making in their parishes, in their dioceses and in Rome. Yet laypeople have little opportunity to have their voices heard at the levels where decisions are made or to have any say in choosing those who make such decisions.

To many people today, the institutional church still seems a monolithic and monarchical structure whose organs of teaching and government are beyond the influence or reach of those for whom it speaks. To whom are church authorities accountable? As Jesuit sociologist John Coleman has observed, there is something anomalous about the church as an institution in which the same people and bodies fill the legislative, judicial and executive functions, without any system of checks and balances. This disenfranchises the laity, leaving them little say in the church's decision-making process, in the formulation of the church's teaching and in the selection of their pastors.

The church, however, is far more flexible than it often appears. It is not simply an institutional structure, but a living organism, a genuine community of lay and ordained members. In what follows, I propose a number of theses that, in countering popular Roman Catholic misconceptions on the relation of the church and the hierarchy, suggest another view of the church.

### *1. The Pope Is Not the Head of the Church.*

Many Catholics continue to imagine the pope as the "head" of the church, the source, after God, from which all power and all authority flow and the chief decision-maker for contemporary questions. These Catholics still perceive the church monarchically. Disputed questions are

answered simply by citing what the pope has said. From this perspective, a papal pronouncement or a document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith outweighs any other argument or position, no matter how broadly based or carefully developed it might be. Thus, complicated questions are decided simply on the basis of an appeal to authority, and the whole complex process of doctrinal development is ignored. This approach represents the Catholic version of the fundamentalist attitude, though it is a papal fundamentalism rather than a biblical one.

A sense for the universality and catholicity of the church, centered on the bishop of Rome, is basic to a Roman Catholic's understanding of church. But the pope cannot be the head of the church. According to Scripture, Christ is its head (Eph. 1:22-23; 5:23; Col. 1:18). The pope is, however, the head of the college of bishops. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) taught that "the episcopal order is the subject of supreme and full power over the universal Church," though never without its head, the Roman Pontiff ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," No. 22).

The rhetoric surrounding the papacy has sometimes contributed to a confused understanding of the pope's role in the church. The special place of the church of Rome was recognized in the early centuries. Ignatius of Antioch (d. 115) referred to Rome's "presidency of love." Irenaeus spoke of Rome's *potentior principalitas*, its "more powerful origin," on the basis of its being founded by Peter and Paul. Cyprian called it the *ecclesia principalis*, the "principal church." Gregory the Great (590-604) rejected the title "universal pope" because it took away from the honor due his brother bishops. The title he took for himself was *servus servorum Dei*, "servant of the servants of God."

Other titles focused on the pope's role as bishop of Rome. Pope Leo the Great (440-61) spoke of himself as "the vicar of Peter," an appropriate title used as late as the 11th and 12th centuries. But by the 12th century this began to change. The title "vicar of Christ" was made popular by Innocent III (d. 1216). Unfortunately, it had the unhappy effect of suggesting that Christ is absent from the church and in need of a vicar to guide it in His place, when in reality He is present through the Spirit. Certain medieval theologians and canonists actually went so far as to speak of the pope as the "vicar of God," a title that fortunately did not catch on.

One familiar papal title, *Pontifex maximus* or "sovereign Pontiff," has an interesting history. Originally a pagan title used for the head of the ancient Roman college of priests, it was used as an appellation for the pope only after the 15th century. To us today, "sovereign Pontiff" sounds particularly sacerdotal and hierarchical. But a popular etymology has long translated the phrase as "chief bridge-builder," not a bad title for a pope.

In the 13th century, St. Bonaventure laid the theological foundations for the papal absolutism that was to

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emerge after the Reformation. His concern was to safeguard the exemption of the newly founded Franciscan and Dominican orders from episcopal control. The First Vatican Council (1869-70) solemnly declared that the pope's supreme power and jurisdiction over the universal church, its pastors and its faithful is "ordinary and immediate." But Vatican II, with its collegial theology of the episcopal office, put Vatican I's papal teaching in a new context. In communion with the pope, the bishops have authority over the universal church and share in its infallibility.

As head of the college of bishops, the bishop of Rome presides over this communion and serves to preserve it. The pope's authority cannot be merely symbolic, for as universal pastor and head of the episcopal college the pope must have the power to act. But the pope is not the head of the church. That role belongs to the risen Christ alone, who continues to guide the church through His Spirit.

## *2. The Selection of Bishops Is Not an Exclusive Right of the Papacy.*

Since his election to the papacy in 1978, Pope John Paul II has put his own stamp on the U.S. Catholic hierarchy. He has named two-thirds of the bishops presently active in the United States, 113 of them chosen with the help of Archbishop Pio Laghi, the previous Apostolic Pro-Nuncio. In addressing the U.S. bishops in 1986, the sixth year of his office, Archbishop Laghi said that helping with the process by which the Pope made his decisions in regard to episcopal appointments was one of the most important responsibilities of his role as papal representative. He clearly has played the major role in that process.

How bishops are selected is a crucial question today. For the first 1,000 years of the church's history, the right of local churches to select their own bishops was clearly recognized. Pope Celestine I declared: "Let a bishop not be imposed upon the people whom they do not want." Pope Leo I stated: "He who has to preside over all must be elected by all." In the Middle Ages bishops were usually appointed by kings. In 1305 Pope Clement V tried to reserve the right of appointing bishops to himself, for the

purpose of raising revenue, but bishops continued to be chosen by local authorities, sometimes kings, sometimes cathedral clergy. Now, however, the new bishop had to be recognized by the pope and to pay for this approval. This increased papal funds, but it also served to express and maintain the communion between the local church and the bishop of Rome. In the late 17th and the 18th centuries, bishops were usually nominated by the rulers of the increasingly secular states of Europe.

It was only in 1884 that the papacy claimed the right to name bishops throughout the world. According to historian James Hennesey, S.J., when John Carroll was elected by his fellow priests as the first bishop of the U.S. church, he failed to set up a system for choosing bishops on the local level. What resulted was the practice of the selection of bishops by Rome, a practice that by the end of the 19th century became the pattern for the entire Western church.

Still, even in more recent times secular governments have had considerable say in the process of naming bishops. In Spain, candidates for the episcopacy were subject to veto by the dictator, Francisco Franco. The governments of France, Austria, Germany, Ecuador, Portugal, the Dominican Republic, Poland, Venezuela, Argentina, El Salvador and Colombia are recognized as having the *droit de regard* or "right to consultation," enabling the government to make known any objections it might have to a candidate for the episcopal office.

If there is a long history of bishops being selected on the local level and if even in more recent times the church has been willing to make an accommodation with governments, even repressive ones, there is no reason why it could not grant local churches the right to name their own bishops or at least to present a *terna* (list of three candidates) to Rome. The new Code of Canon Law (1983) recognizes this possibility. It states that the pope "freely appoints bishops or confirms those lawfully elected" (Can. 375). What remains necessary is that a bishop selected locally would have to be recognized by the Apostolic See in Rome in order to be in communion with the universal church.

Thus, the alternative to the present practice is not necessarily local elections, with candidates running for bish-

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op, which could politicize the episcopal office. But there is both historical precedent and canonical provision for the laity and clergy of local churches to have considerably more say in the process of selecting their bishops.

**3. *The Magisterium Cannot Function Independently of the Church.***

For many Roman Catholics, the magisterium of pope and bishops constitutes a teaching authority placed over the church and equipped with the special assistance of the Holy Spirit to define faith and doctrine, rather than an office through which the faith entrusted to the entire church comes to official expression. In language that has become traditional, the magisterium constitutes the *ecclesia docens*, the "teaching church," placed over and separate from the *ecclesia discens*, the "learning church."

Yet this is not how the magisterium functions in the real order. The church is not fundamentally an institution, exercising teaching authority from the top down. The Holy Spirit is active in the whole church, not just in the hierarchy. The doctrine of the *sensus fidelium* ("understanding of the faithful") shows that the church's dogma emerges out of the faith of the entire church. The ecclesial practice of "reception" of doctrine is evidence of a mutuality or interdependence between hierarchical authority and the body of the faithful in the formulation of doctrine, leading occasionally to the modification or revision of teachings of the ordinary papal magisterium, as J. Robert Dionne has shown (*The Papacy and the Church*, 1987). To believe that Christian truth is discerned simply by magisterial pronouncement, without taking into account the complex process of the reception and the development of doctrine, is a variety of the papal fundamentalism mentioned earlier.

Even in the exercise of the extraordinary or infallible papal magisterium, the pope is defining what the church believes. This was evident in the two cases of "infallible" definitions of the extraordinary papal magisterium, the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Assumption (1950), both of which were made only after a process of consulting the church through a polling of the bishops. Thus, the church functions as a communion in which all

members, faithful and hierarchy, are mutually interdependent. Neither functions independently of the other. A clearer acknowledgment of this interdependence would do an enormous amount of good toward reassuring Christians of other churches who remain suspicious of the papal magisterium.

How can the church better express the shared responsibility for its life that its interdependent nature indicates? There are a number of steps that could be taken, giving recognition to the dialectical relation that ought to exist between office and charism, without changing the fundamental structure of the church. Representatives of the clergy and laity could participate in church decision-making structures without taking anything away from the leadership role of the pope or the episcopal college. The presence of theological experts and lay auditors at the 1987 Synod of Bishops on the Laity, able to participate in the small group discussions but not to vote, is one model for a more participatory style of decision-making. Similarly, the presence of the university doctors of theology and representatives of the religious orders in church councils of the late Middle Ages is precedent for broadening the way the church's teaching magisterium might be exercised in the church of tomorrow (Can. 228, No. 2).

**4. *The Church Is Not a Single, Monolithic Institution.***

The contemporary Roman Catholic Church has returned to a concept of the church as *koinonia* or "communion," which characterizes how the church understood itself during the first millennium. The church is a communion of churches. From this perspective, the church of Christ cannot be understood as a single, monolithic, worldwide institution.

But at the same time, as the C.D.F. makes clear in its recent letter, "Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion" (June 1992), the church of Christ cannot be reduced to a base community or a particular church as complete in itself, nor can it be understood simply as the sum of all the particular churches, a view currently in the ascendancy in the World Council of Churches.

The church as a communion has both visible and invisible elements. Invisibly, ecclesial communion is based on sharing in a common life with God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. Visibly, the common life is mediated through sacramental and institutional structures—specifically baptism, the Eucharist and the visible bonds of communion of the particular churches. In the words of the C.D.F. document, “There is an intimate relationship between this invisible communion and the visible communion in the teaching of the apostles, in the sacraments and in the hierarchical order” (No. 4).

Within this communal ecclesiology, the pope has a crucial role to play. The papacy is not something derived from a particular church. According to Vatican II, it belongs to the fullness of the church (“Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” No. 14). It is precisely through communion with the bishop of Rome that a particular bishop and church are in communion with the church catholic, the communion of churches. The C.D.F. document—despite some infelicitous phrases—underlines this point, and it is an important one. As Cardinal Carlo Martini of Milan observed after the letter was published, the question of papal primacy cannot be indefinitely ignored.

But if the C.D.F. letter has a good sense of the church’s universality, it may need to deal more adequately with the implications of the existence of particular churches not in communion with Rome and, specifically, with the eccle-

sial and Eucharistic reality of those “ecclesial communities” stemming from the Reformation. The letter, while recognizing the Orthodox churches as particular churches, argues that the Reformation communities lack the apostolic succession and thus have not retained a “valid” Eucharist (No. 17).

The Roman Catholic Church may not yet be able officially to recognize Protestant Eucharists as valid in terms of its own canonical requirements. At the same time, Vatican II did not explicitly use the word “invalid” in reference to Protestant Eucharistic celebrations. Nor can the church definitively exclude the sacramental reality of celebrations in churches whose Eucharistic faith and practice closely reflect its own. If it is true that “reception” of doctrine involves not just church authorities but the entire people of God, the question must be raised as to what it means when Christians from different traditions—Roman Catholics among them—are able to recognize the Lord’s presence in one another’s celebrations of the Eucharist, even though their church leaders have yet to acknowledge this.

In concluding, the C.D.F. letter acknowledges that the Petrine ministry the Lord intends for the church “can find expression in various ways according to the different circumstances of time and place as history has shown” (No. 18). This recognition of the difference between the essential meaning of the Petrine ministry and its different historical expressions is a hopeful sign for the future. ■

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