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CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Rev. Paul Fleming*

Most of us belong to a particular Christian church because we were born into families who were members of that church. Some remain members of the church of their birth without giving it too much thought, but many remain because, in the process of maturing, they have found in their church a true avenue for growth in faith and experience of God. Some have left the church of their birth and joined other churches in the belief that the other church can best facilitate their journey in faith—they find its structures and organisation more appealing. All too often, however, the question of structure in the churches has been a source of polemics and division—thus negating the primary purpose of the structure which was to lead to the growth of the Church of Christ.

Here we are concerned with looking at the structures of government in the Catholic Church—how they came about and how they function today. We need to remind ourselves at the outset that structures in any organisation or society must not be an end in themselves—they are at the service of the organisation or society. In the context of the Church their primary purpose must be to facilitate those who share an interest in Jesus and to facilitate association with others who share this interest.¹

“Tu es Petrus, et super hanc petram aedificabo ecclesiam meam •” These words from Matthew 16:18 adorn the cupola of St Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Many Catholics see in these words a clear indication that Jesus installed Peter as head of his Church on earth (the role today described as ‘Pope’) and that Peter, along with the

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¹ Enda Lyons, *Partnership in Parish* (Columba Press, 1987) pp 6-9.

other Apostles, was given the task of governing the Church. This authority was passed on from generation to generation, and is still the basic structure of government in the Catholic Church.

Through the centuries there has been much discussion about what these words actually mean. There are objections that this may not even be a genuine saying of Jesus—nowhere else in the Gospels does Jesus speak of founding a church. There are objections that, even if Jesus did say this, Peter never in fact enjoyed any such primacy in the early Church—one such instance is the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 where it is James who presides over the meeting. Of course where there are arguments in favour of one position there will always be counter arguments, and some argue that Peter's primacy is seen both in the Gospels and in the Acts of the Apostles: Peter is seen as one of the 'inner-circle' of disciples; Peter features prominently in the discovery of the empty tomb and in the post-resurrection appearances; Peter plays a key role on Pentecost Sunday; and he is the initial one who silences the critics concerning the mission to the Gentiles.

Whether we accept or reject these arguments and counter-arguments, we are still faced with the fact that the evangelist, Matthew, included in his Gospel the saying "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church •" We are also faced with the fact that the Catholic Church has a structure of government wherein the role of the Pope is of central importance. It is unhelpful, especially in the context of ecumenical dialogue, to read the developed papacy back into the New Testament era; it is helpful to try to understand how the present structures came about and the value they have in fulfilling the task given by Jesus to his first followers.

The Missionary Church

After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, and the Pentecost event, the Church was essentially missionary in character—the primary task was to spread the message of Jesus. Subsequent to this came the necessity for the development of structures which would preserve the apostolic heritage. This is seen especially in the two letters to Timothy and the letter to Titus, commonly called the Pastorals. While it is generally accepted that it is difficult to

attribute these letters in their present form to Paul himself, it is fair to say that they are dealing with a situation which was inevitable—the necessity for individuals to take on leadership roles and responsibility in the churches which Paul had founded. This was a situation which Paul had dealt with in his own life-time—Acts 20:17 shows Paul summoning the elders of the Church in Ephesus, and the letter to the Philippians is addressed to “all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops (or overseers) and deacons.”

In both the Pastorals and Acts we see these individuals referred to by the title of *presbyteros* and *episkopos*. It is an oversimplification to see the *presbyteros* coming from the Jewish tradition and the *episkopos* coming from the Gentile tradition.² It is also difficult to determine any distinction between the two titles—in Acts 20:17ff all the *presbyteroi* are referred to as *episkopoi*. What we do get from the Acts and the Pastorals, however, are indications of what their functions are to be—they are to be the official teachers of the community, safe-guarding the faith they have inherited and rejecting false teachings (Acts 20:28-31) and also to care for and administer the Church as they would their own family (1 Timothy 3:5).

Individual Responsibility—the Episkopos

Eventually, however, the two titles came to be distinguished. There was a move from a group of people having responsibility to the practice of an individual holding responsibility—and this individual was known as the *episkopos*. When did this take place? If we accept the traditional dating for the letters of Ignatius of Antioch—that they were written during the reign of Trajan, i.e. before 117—then we can say that by the early years of the second century the three-fold hierarchy of one bishop, a group of presbyters and a number of deacons was established in Syria and parts of Asia Minor. By the third quarter of the second century it would seem that every church (with the exception of Alexandria) had a single bishop.

² See Raymond Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*.

Along with this development we have the practice of the local bishop being the one who presided at the celebration of the eucharist. As numbers increased, this role was delegated to one of the presbyters. But the importance of the role of the bishop in the eucharist was still maintained with the custom, in the early centuries, of bringing a portion of the eucharistic bread consecrated by the bishop to the eucharist being presided over by the presbyter.

Divine Institution or Human Institution?

Was this development of structures part of Jesus' plan for his Church? Some would argue that it was a purely natural development, based on a human need for structures and organisation. This, in itself, does not negate the idea that it could be part of Jesus' plan. Very few Catholic scholars would argue that the present structures in the Catholic Church are not partly the product of historical development. But we are still faced with the fact that Jesus gave a charge to the apostles to preach to all nations, and that this charge was to continue to the end of this age. Therefore, while in many respects the original apostles could have no successors because their personal experience of Jesus was unique and untransmissible, their pastoral ministry was to continue—this was the will of Jesus—and this implied the appointment of successors. This is seen to be done in the New Testament.

Another aspect worth considering here is the role of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised to send the Spirit to “guide you into all the truth” (Jn 16:13). If we accept that Jesus sent the Spirit, and that this Spirit was active in guiding the early Church in its discernment of the inspired texts to be included in the New Testament and in its discernment of the Christological and theological implications of the life and work of Jesus, can we not also argue that this same Spirit was active in guiding the early Church as it developed structures to facilitate the charge given by Jesus to his apostles?

This is the understanding of the Catholic Church, and this is why the Second Vatican Council in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church can talk of the bishops as successors of the apostles: “This sacred synod, following in the steps of the First Vatican Council, teaches and declares with it that Jesus Christ, the eternal

pastor, set up the holy Church by entrusting the apostles with the mission as he himself had been sent by the Father (cf Jn 20:21). He willed that their successors, the bishops namely, should be the shepherds in his Church until the end of the world. In order that the episcopate itself, however, might be one and undivided he put Peter at the head of the other apostles, and in him he set up a lasting and visible source and foundation of the unity both of faith and of communion”.³

The Second Vatican Council

The chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church which deals with the hierarchy in the Church comes after the chapters which deal with the Mystery of the Church and the Church as the People of God, and situates the role of the hierarchy as one of service to the Church and its members. This brings us back to a point made at the beginning of this paper that structures must not be an end in themselves—they must be at the service of the organisation in which they are found. No one could deny that, at times in the Church’s history, this ideal of service has not always been as obvious as it should have been—matters secular often impinged on matters sacred. But in the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church makes a genuine attempt to highlight the role of service and describes the bishops as “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God”.⁴

Bishops have the task of being “teachers of doctrine, ministers of sacred worship, and holders of office in government”⁵—teaching, sanctifying and governing. Each bishop has this responsibility for his own diocese, but when he is ordained to this task he also becomes a member of what is called the episcopal college where he acts in communion with all the other bishops, thus keeping his own local church in the communion of all the churches—which together form the Catholic Church. In this episcopal college the Pope is seen as first among the bishops. This

³ *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, #18

⁴ *ibid*, #21

⁵ *ibid*, #20

is because he, as bishop of Rome, is seen as successor of Peter who himself is understood to have had a position of primacy among the first group chosen by Jesus to continue his mission.

This solidarity among the bishops is for the good of the universal church. This is seen in a very real way when the bishops gather together in council to teach authoritatively (such as at the Second Vatican Council). But it is also evident when bishops dispersed throughout the world or gathered together in local areas teach authoritatively concerning matters of faith and morals. The purpose of such teaching is to spread the message of Christ and help build up the Kingdom of God.

Of course this is not something which is entrusted solely to the bishops. All members of the Church are called to share in this task. The Second Vatican Council tried to correct an imbalance whereby the role of the clergy was seen as active and the role of the laity was seen as passive. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church states “• the faithful who by Baptism are incorporated into Christ, are placed in the People of God, and in their own way share the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ, and to the best of their ability carry on the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world.”⁶ All share in the priestly office of Christ by offering their worship and their lives to the Father; all share in the prophetic office by witnessing to what is taught; all share in the kingly office by commitment to service of God and service of our fellow human beings.

The documents of Vatican II, and documents issued since then, emphasise the common call to ministry in the Church. In many areas this has been well received and great progress has been made. In other areas there has been confusion about the relationships of ordained and non-ordained ministries. “The Church” is still seen by many as the hierarchy and the clerics, and the enthusiasm felt by many after Vatican II has been replaced by frustration because of the apparent lack of implementation. In a world where change is so rapid many people long for the security and stability of established structures. The ideals of Vatican II are still valid; the implementation of them will take time. There is an

⁶ ibid #31

increasing awareness in the Church of a need for structures which will facilitate greater participation of all members and at the same time preserve what is worthwhile in the Church's long tradition. This can be a difficult balance to achieve, and the inherent problems are common to many Christian churches.

St Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, uses the image of the body. Here he highlights how the body has different organs, each performing its own function yet co-operating in harmony. The problems St Paul faced in the first century are maybe not that different from our problems today. In truthfulness to the mission given to us by Christ, each church must continually look at its structures and its function in the world and ask itself if this is the most efficient way to spread the message and build up the Kingdom of God.

P Fleming