



North Thompson Catholic Parishes

Roman Catholic Diocese of Kamloops

INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION SELECT THEMES OF ECCLESIOLOGY

VI. THE NEW PEOPLE OF GOD AS A HIERARCHICALLY ORDERED SOCIETY

VI.1. Communion, Structure, and Organization

From the moment of her emergence in history, the new people of God is structured around the pastors chosen by Jesus Christ himself in his appointment of the apostles (Mt 10:1-42) with Peter at their head (Jn 21:15-17). “That divine mission, which was committed by Christ to the apostles, is destined to last until the end of the world (cf. Mt 28:20), since the Gospel, which they were charged to hand on, is, for the Church, the principle of all its life for all time. For that very reason the apostles were careful to appoint successors in this hierarchically constituted society” (LG 20).

Thus the people of God, the Church, cannot be disassociated from the ministries that give her structure, and especially the episcopate. For with the death of the apostles, the episcopate became that veritable “ministry of the community” that bishops carry out with the help of presbyters and deacons (ibid.). Henceforth, if the Church presents herself as a single people and communion of faith, hope, and charity, within which Christ’s faithful “are ... endowed with true Christian dignity” (*LG* 18), this people and communion are provided with ministries and means of growth that will assure the common good of the whole body. One cannot then separate out structural from vital aspects in the Church, since these aspects are coinvolved at the deepest level. “The one Mediator, Christ, established and ever sustains here on earth his holy Church, the community of faith, hope, and charity, as a visible organization through which he communicates truth and grace to all-men. But the society structured with hierarchical organs and the mystical Body of Christ, the visible society and the spiritual community, the earthly Church and the Church endowed with heavenly riches, are not to be thought of as two realities. On the contrary, they form one complex reality that comes together from a human and a divine element” (*LG* 8).

The communion that gives definition to the new people of God is therefore a social communion of a hierarchically ordered sort. As the *nota praevia explicativa* of 16 November 1964 makes clear: “Communion is a concept held in high honor in the ancient Church (as also today, notably in the East). By it is meant not some vague sentiment but an organic reality that calls for juridical expression and yet at the same time is ensouled by love”. It is here that one may reasonably raise the question of the presence and significance of juridical organization in the Church. While the ontological, sacramental function of the Church may be distinguished from its canonical-juridical aspect (cf. the *nota praevia explicativa* of 16 November 1964), it is nonetheless true that in differing degrees both aspects are absolutely necessary for the Church’s life. Bearing in mind the partial or relative analogy (*non mediocrem analogiam*) (LG 8) of the Church with the Word incarnate as the text of *Lumen gentium* (8) portrays it, we will not forget that “as the assumed nature, inseparably united to him, serves the divine Word as a living organ of salvation, so, in a somewhat similar way, does the social structure of the Church serve the Spirit of Christ, who vivifies it in the building up of the Body”. The analogy drawn here with the Word incarnate enables us to affirm that the Church as “organ of salvation” must be understood in such a way as not to fall foul of either of those two heretical excesses in Christology known to antiquity. Thus we shall avoid, on the one hand, an ecclesial “Nestorianism” that would recognize no subsistent relationship between the divine and the human elements in the Church’s life. On the other hand, we must be equally vigilant against an ecclesial

“Monophysitism”, for which everything in the Church is “divinized”, leaving no space for the defects and faults of the Church’s organization, the sad harvest of the sins and ignorance of men. The Church is, of course, a sacrament, but she is not sacramental to the same intensity or with parity of perfection in everything she undertakes. Since we shall be returning to the theme of the Church as sacrament, it will suffice to note here that the domain where the Church’s sacramentality takes on its most potent form is that of the Liturgy (cf. *SC* 7, 10). Next comes the ministry of the Word in its highest expressions (cf. *LG* 21, 25). Then lastly we have the functioning of the pastoral office with its canonical authority or power of government (*LG* 23). It follows that ecclesiastical legislation, even if it takes its rise from an authority whose origin is divine, cannot avoid being influenced in some measure by ignorance and sin. In other words, ecclesiastical legislation is not and cannot be infallible. But this by no means signifies that it is without importance in the mystery of salvation. To deny the Church’s law all positive, salvific value would be, in the last analysis, to restrict the Church’s sacramentality to the sacraments alone and so to enfeeble the Church’s visibility in everyday life.

VI.2. The Action of the Hierarchically Ordered Society

In the fundamental structure of the Church one can identify principles that throw light on her organization and canonical-judicial practice:

1. As a visible community and social organism, the Church needs norms that express her fundamental structure and give greater definition to certain conditions of communal life in virtue of judgments of a prudential kind. These conditions may change, and indeed faithfulness to the Holy Spirit may *require* that they change.

2. The goal of ecclesiastical legislation can be nothing other than the common good of the Church. This common good includes in an unbreakable union both the safeguarding of the deposit of faith received from Christ and the spiritual progress of the sons of God, the members of Christ's Body

3. If the Church has need of norms and law, then we must recognize that she enjoys legislative authority (*LG* 27; cf. *Codex Iuris Canonici*, 135, 333, 336, 391, 392, 445, 455, etc.). Such a legislative authority will scrupulously respect the general rule recalled by the conciliar Declaration on Religious Liberty. According to this principle, "man's freedom should be given the fullest possible recognition and should not be curtailed except when and insofar as is necessary" (*DH* 7). Such a power also implies that legitimate legal measures must be accepted and executed by the faithful with a religious obedience. However, the exercise of this authority demands from pastors a special attention to the formidable responsibility that legislative power carries with it. Connected with this is the grave moral duty to make appropriate prior consultation, and also the obligation to proceed when necessary to subsequent rectification.

The presence of juridical elements in the Church's dispositions for the ordering of her own life suggests some further considerations. Christian liberty is one of the features characteristic of the New Covenant or the "new people of God" and constitutes an innovation when compared with the Old Law. And yet the advent of this freedom, already connected as it was in the witness of Israel's prophets with the internalization of the Law (cf. Jer 31:31), does not involve the total disappearance of external law from the Church's life, at least so long as she is still "on pilgrimage" in this world. The New Testament itself presents us with fragments of ecclesial law (Mt 18:15-18; Acts 15:28ff.; 1 Tim 3:1-13; 4:17-22; Tit 1:5-9; etc.). The earliest of the Church Fathers concerned themselves with developing rules for the establishment and maintenance of good order in the community. We see this happening in Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and others. Councils, both ecumenical and regional, made disciplinary decisions, which they promulgated alongside their doctrinal definitions properly so called. Law was thus already important in the ancient Church. But it did not always take written form. There was also a customary law, which was no less mandatory and often constituted the source of the "holy canons" that were later set down in writing.