

6-1-2002

The Church IS a Democracy

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No real reform of the Catholic Church is possible—in areas of clergy sexual abuse or elsewhere—unless two false "truisms" are corrected. These regnant falsities, perceived not only as facts, but as binding norms, are: "the Church is not a democracy" and, the implied converse, "the Church is a monarchy, governed by papal and episcopal monarchs." Nothing is intelligible outside of its history, said Teilhard de Chardin, and that holds for this monarchical deviation that paralyzes the contemporary Roman Catholic Church.

Democracy is not an alien secular concept. In fact it has better biblical roots than the claims of pope and diocesan bishops to privileged rights to teach and rule. Western democratic theory is in deep debt to the moral revolution of the Jewish and Christian scriptures. When the ancient Hebrews took the symbol of "the image of God," long used to shore up monarchs, and say it applied not just to pharaohs and kings but to all of us, the seeds of democracy--and even of our Bill of Rights--were sown. When Jesus addressed governance he said: "You know that in the world the recognized rulers lord it over their subjects, and their great men make them feel the weight of authority. This is not the way with you; among you, whoever wants to be great must be your servant, and whoever wants to be the first must be the willing slave of all." (Mark 10:42-43) C.H. Dodd thinks that this thought was for Jesus "fundamental to the whole idea of the divine commonwealth." It was the way government should function in any moral society.

Then whence the monarchical penchant of the Catholic Church? It starts with the papacy, which is the model then passed down to the monarchical bishops in individual dioceses. (Pope Paul VI accurately saw that the papacy was the main obstacle to ecumenism in our time. It is also, I would add, the main obstacle to church reform.) There was no pope in the early church.

The papacy as we have it was not part of the original ecclesial communities. As church historian Walter Ullmann says, as late as the year 313, "there was, as yet, no suggestion that the Roman church possessed any legal or constitutional preeminence." Leo decided to change that. The papacy as we know it is not Petrine, but Leonine. The Leo was Leo I, Bishop in Rome from 440 to 461, a Roman jurist who cast the Roman episcopate in terms borrowed directly from the Roman imperial court. The one who was called *Summus pontifex* (supreme pontiff), who held the *plentitudo potestatis* (the fullness of monarchical power) and the *principatus* (primacy) was the Roman Emperor. Leo grabbed all this language and applied it to himself. As Walter Ullmann says, "this papal plentitude of power was...a thoroughly juristic notion, and could be understood only...against the Roman Law background." This lording over notion directly contradicted the Jesus text on the proper nature of governance.

As Ullmann notes, Leo's claim was political; he was reacting against the power claims of the church in Constantinople, and he and others in the Roman church made no effort to base their new claims on the text in Matthew's gospel..."thou are Peter, etc."

The moment stands out as a classic failure of fifth century theology to exercise its magisterial role of critic, especially as critic of those who would make unjust power claims within the Christian community. There was a failure to recognize, as Leonard Swidler writes that "the model of how to live an authentically human life that Jesus of the Gospels presents...is an egalitarian model." The all-male claim to church governing power staked out in our canon law has no sound biblical roots. As Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza writes: "While--for apologetic

reasons--the post-Pauline and post-Petrine writers seek to limit women's leadership roles in the Christian community to roles which are culturally and religiously acceptable, the evangelists called Mark and John highlight the alternative character of the Christian community, and therefore accord women apostolic and ministerial leadership."

Most Catholic theologians today are scandalously timid in reimagining the new forms the church should be taking today. For at least a century after Jesus the idea of a monarchical bishop in charge of a diocese was not the norm. There is theological room for courageous creativity in discussing church governance and leadership. Now is the *tempus opportunum*. Our bishops have been demonstrating convincingly that they do not possess any special charism of leadership. Our hierarchy are theologically starved by their own choosing. Avery Cardinal Dulles in his Presidential address to The Catholic Theological Society of America, aptly noted that the hierarchy "seem to evade in a calculated way the findings of modern scholarship." They speak "without broad consultation with the theological community. In stead, a few carefully selected theologians are asked to defend a pre-established position."

The early church knew its freedom in the Spirit and did not shy from helpful adaptation. The list of ministries in 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12 and Ephesians 4 all vary without apology. When they saw need for changes they changed. They knew there was no blueprint handed down from heaven. In the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 20 the terms *episcopos*, which came to be "bishop") and the term *presbyter* (which came to be priest) seem to be used interchangeably. In 1 Peter 2, the whole church is described as "priestly." Indeed the term priest is lubricious and still open to change and adaptation. As professor Sandra Schneiders writes: "Suffice it to say that there is wide consensus among reputable New Testament scholars that there were no Christian priests in New Testament times and therefore certainly none ordained or appointed by Jesus. The priesthood does not emerge in the early church until the end of the first century at the earliest and, even at that relatively late date, the evidence is scanty and unclear."

As Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger put it so wisely some years ago: "The church is not the petrification of what once was, but its living presence in every age. The church's dimension is therefore the present and the future no less than the past." (The term "petrification" is interesting in this context.)

The Catholic Church today is wracked by world-wide scandals regarding sexual abuse by priests and bishops. Arbitrarily enforced celibacy is key to this but not the main problem of this church. False hierarchical claims limply supported by a cowed laity and a timid theological "magisterium" (a term used by Thomas Aquinas) is the Catholic problem. Paul had some relevant advice regarding the spiritual democracy that the church should be: "In each of us the Spirit is manifested in one particular way, for some useful purpose." (I Cor. 12: 7) With those credentials in hand, he would tell an infantilized church (patriarchy does that): "Do not be childish, my friends...be grown-up in your thinking." (I. Cor. 14: 20) If this church is to revive, the recovery will be led not by the Leonine hierarchy but by a mature laity and by theologians who brace their knowledge with courage, the virtue that St. Thomas Aquinas said is the "precondition of all virtue."