

Accountability, Credibility, and Authority

Paul Lakeland

The author uses the model of a healthy family to explain the kind of accountability, credibility, and authority needed in the church.

He challenges the church to awaken from its amnesia about Trinitarian relationship as a God-given model for ecclesial structures.

We who are parents know the complex process by which children come to be treated, eventually, as adults. The nurturance that overwhelms all other considerations through their very earliest years gives way to a love that has within it a measure of discipline. However successfully that stage is negotiated, hormones inevitably achieve a temporary triumph in the adolescent struggle for self-actualization. From this moment on, maturity emerges as the young person grows to see that responsibility and freedom in appropriate balance are the stuff of which healthy adulthood is made.

The challenges of being church today exhibit many of the characteristics of the transition from adolescence to adulthood, and the dialectic of freedom and responsibility has much to offer us as a way between the Scylla of perpetual immaturity and the Charybdis of a joyless misreading of the good news of the Gospel. The twentieth-century transformation of the laity is but a small part of this growth. The parent/child image utilized here is not an analogy for the clergy/lay relationship. We are in possession of no simplistic parable in which the laity are being led toward adulthood by a wise and discerning parental mag-

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isterium, or in which the bishop is daddy to his little flock. Lay Christians are not children of their clergy, but all Christians are children of God. In fact, the metaphor is directed primarily to the relationship between the triune God and the community of believers. “Growing up,” then, means growing more into the likeness of God as individuals, as a community of faith and, in the last analysis, as the whole people of God.

To explore the value of this metaphor of maturation for the life of the church today we proceed in four steps. First, we clarify the meaning of the terms *accountability*, *credibility*, and *authority*, and their relationship to one another. This preliminary analysis leads to the claim that the interrelatedness suggested by the basic meaning of accountability is best imaged in the Trinity. Because the Trinity is our model for a fully realized life, we attempt an explanation of the trinitarian life of God as a model for living in an adult manner. Then we apply these reflections to the internal life of the church, asking about the meaning of both accountability and credibility to the faith community itself: what do they mean *in and for* the church? Finally, we illustrate the argument in just one test case, that of authority in the church and the authority of the church.

Accountability and Credibility

Since the root of the religious impulse is the conviction that we are neither our own explanation nor our reason for living, it seems logical enough that a sense of accountability would permeate the practice of Christian living. Accountability is the public face of responsibility, illustrated in our willingness to submit our actions to the judgment of others. It follows directly from the recognition that the human being is a member of a community whose rights are always proportionate to the rights of others. It is best illustrated in the family (often referred to as “the domestic church”). Ideally a family is a community marked by unconditional love that directs it outward to this world to eventually make it their own. The family is thus both the domestic church and a school of humanity. While most families do not fully live up to these high ideals, surely the fulfillment of these ideals is what families are actually for. And in any family striving to be what a family should be, full accountability of all members to one another is non-negotiable. The mixture of freedom and responsibility varies with the member’s level of maturity, but two characteristics are constant. First, all, including the most senior members of the family, are accountable to all the others. Second, this accountability is best understood as the accountability of each individual to the family understood as a whole.

There are, then, three senses of the term *accountability* observable in the family/community. There is the very limited understanding of accountability as the obedience of those with lesser positions to those with more senior or “higher”

positions. In familial terms this would be evident in the Victorian family, where the stern *paterfamilias* is rarely seen except to give orders. Beyond this is the understanding of the “lower” accountability of all family or community members to one another. The governing term here is not obedience but openness. The second or “higher” accountability is the richer mutuality and web of loving relationships that is consistent with the lower accountability and could not exist without it, but that goes far beyond it. This is the accountability of all family members to the family as such. It is in no sense a hierarchical idea, for trust, love, and mutuality have replaced even the genuinely reciprocal responsibility that marks the lower accountability.

One of the most frequently expressed recent criticisms of the Catholic Church occasioned by the scandal of clerical sexual abuse of minors is that the practice

of accountability is poor. This observation is accurate, but it fails to distinguish between the different senses or levels of accountability. In today’s church, in fact, accountability is primarily understood in the impoverished sense of obedience to higher authority. Accountability operates only in one direction, upward: laity are accountable to their pastors, clergy to bishops, bishops to the Pope, and so on. This could be solved fairly simply by instituting structures that most human communities consider healthy, and having lay people periodically do performance reviews of their clergy, clergy of their bishops, and bishops of the Pope. Indeed, this would be an enormously healthy step for the church to take. We would then at least be on the

verge of commitment to a genuine application of the lower accountability, but we would still miss the larger question. This contractual accountability might be contrasted fruitfully with a covenantal accountability that may have its clearest human expression in the marital relationship. Accountability in this sense is a dimension of love that is buttressed with the values of openness, trust, and fundamental equality.

Before we relate the question of accountability to ecclesiological issues we must say a thing or two about the relationship between accountability and credibility. To do this we return to the familial metaphor. How often have we who are parents of adolescents found ourselves exclaiming, “If you want to be treated like an adult, then behave like an adult!” Credibility is directly proportional to the level of practice of accountability. But whereas accountability is a practice for which, in the last analysis, we as individuals are responsible, credibility is something we acquire in the eyes of others through the transparency of our practice

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of accountability. In short, respect must be earned. Respect should never be extended to status. While respect can pertain to particular roles, it should not be afforded to the parent, for example, merely because he or she is a parent. Of course, younger children may not be able to discern when to give and when to withhold respect, but that soon changes. Children rapidly learn to discern inauthenticity. Respect follows from the credibility that is based on the public practice of accountability. Anything else simply enables dysfunctional behavior.

The Church and the Triune God

A great irony of the Catholic Church is that while it is devoted to a trinitarian God it has resolutely adopted a hierarchical structure. Seemingly the ecclesial structure God would want would be one that took the hint from God's nature about the superiority of trinitarianism over hierarchical stratification (Volf, 191–257). Just as the call to Christian discipleship suggests a life lived according to the patterns and choices of Jesus, so similarly the church of God would reflect what seemingly is the divine preference for relationships. Lisa Sowle Cahill made this point with reference to the place of women in the life of the church (Cahill, 134–35), but it is sufficiently rich and trenchant to serve as an altar call to ecclesial renewal. What if we modeled the church on the life of God instead of on the structures of the Roman empire or the Ford Motor Company? It appears it would be a good thing. It would certainly seem that the efforts at Vatican II and beyond to build a communion ecclesiology represented steps in this direction, yet so much in Catholicism remains undeniably hierarchical.

In advocating the giant step from the triune life to the *communio* of the church, it is encouraging to recall the church's teaching about baptism. The easy assertion of Christian tradition that in baptism we are all one, that in baptism there is "no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female" (Gal 3:28), is a fundamental conviction of the church, shared by the stern guardians of orthodoxy in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and by Call to Action and Dignity alike. In baptism we become a new creation, we are remade in the image and likeness of God, and—lo and behold—this community of the new covenant turns out to be one of fundamental equality in which hierarchy, if it is anything, is a distinctly secondary development. While some clericalists (even Yves Congar for a time) have sometimes tried to make out that hierarchy came before community, such an assertion does not stand up to reflection on the sacramental primacy of baptism. As Cardinal Suenens was fond of saying, the proudest moment in the life of a pope is not his consecration as bishop or election as pope, but his baptism as a Christian.

Fortified by these insights about baptism as our entry into *communio*, we can turn to a trinitarian reflection on *communio* itself. First let us review our little, yet

important knowledge about the formal characteristics of the inner life of the Trinity. Most importantly, there are no ranks among the persons of the Godhead. All are equally and fully God, despite the difference that is traditionally asserted in the terminology of Father, Son, and Spirit or of Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Any image or human representation of the Trinity must, if it is to be acceptable, respect this equality. Second, the radical equality of the three persons of the Trinity does not extinguish their difference. Third, the difference that each expresses is something we encounter, as human beings, only in their relationship to our salvation, in what theologians call the economic Trinity. What these differences mean within the divine life is not for us to know, though the language of the divine “processions” is a human effort in that direction. We know surely that God is differentiated in terms of what we might call divine mission or ministry, but that this differentiation is not based on any prior distinction between the three that we could possibly know. All that we know is the economic Trinity, and there the only distinction, one might say, is at the level of mission. But we can and must assert that the economic Trinity is conformed to the inner life of God—the so-called “immanent” Trinity.

Formally speaking, trinitarian relations are marked by total openness. Lack of accountability in such a context is unthinkable. In the Trinity we are talking about that higher accountability that is the real issue for the church. The three persons of the Trinity do not have to explain their actions to one another. Their lower accountability is subsumed in the higher accountability of a relationship of total openness and perfect equality. If we seek an image to enlighten us, perhaps we could recall the Cappadocian Fathers’ insistence that the three persons are engaged in *perichoresis*, that is, in a divinely and intricately interwoven dance formation. This is no heavenly hip-hop, rave, or stomp. They are *intertwined* with one another. Picture talented quickstep dancers, aficionados of the tango, or trapeze artists. There is no way that they can successfully accomplish their mission without complete accountability, openness to, and trust in one another. If dancers or trapeze artists suggest themselves as better images of divine accountability than the church, perhaps we should consider whether the church should be more like them. It is surely a salutary warning against any attempt to idealize or apotheosize ecclesial structures that, when we search for human metaphors to use analogically of the Godhead, the hierarchical structure of the church does not immediately spring to mind.

Accountability in the Church

The above reflections on the divine life should suggest how impoverished our ecclesial understandings of accountability tend to be. Quasi-judicial approaches to accountability certainly have their place, particularly after the fiasco

of episcopal failures of leadership in the wake of the sexual abuse scandal. But in the end this is nursery accountability. It is not unimportant, but it is only the first step toward true adult accountability. We must go beyond this to the kind of mutuality imaged in the ballroom dancers. And we must go further still to the *eros* and *agapē* of accountability that we find in marriage, and that are, in themselves, a pale shadow of the *eros* and *agapē* of the divine life.

If the church is truly to practice accountability in the fullest sense of the word, both its polity and its culture must manifest total mutuality. There can be no hierarchy in the church in the sense of strata of power, still less of levels of holiness attached to strata of power, if the church is truly to be the church of God. Of course, there are differences in the mission of church members as they place their particular charisms at the service of all. Some people will take up leadership positions, and leadership sometimes involves the exercise of authority, even if that is often a confession of failure. But the model for leaders in the church cannot be the stern Victorian parental image of a God who lovingly corrects and sometimes chastises God's people. We are invited into the divine life. We are called to the same loving interrelatedness that the Trinity is, and our leaders, while their mission is to lead, should be held to the same standards of fundamental equality as the divine life itself exemplifies. Thus St. Augustine's famous remark: "For you I am a bishop, with you I am a Christian."

The problem of lack of accountability in the church is ultimately, therefore, that the church has placed hierarchical organizational paraphernalia ahead of a fundamental reality that is constantly in danger of being forgotten. We can make the point in the categories of personal and structural sin. When a bishop hides his personal failings behind the walls of clerical culture, he is guilty of personal sin. This sin is enabled by the structural sin of clericalism. But the structural sin is in its turn a product of profound theological amnesia, of a far greater sin in which pride, power, and status have led the church too often into the error of thinking that its hierarchical structure is its essence. Its essence, as Vatican II has taught us, is relationship, interrelatedness, or *communio*. The way forward for the church must then be to reform its structures so that it is clearly seen to be a community of complete accountability, closer in consequence to the triune God whom it exists to serve.

If it is true that this trinitarian accountability is something to which the church is called, the church must demonstrate the characteristics of an open society. But

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the institutions of the Catholic Church today too often perpetuate secrecy and seem to be incapable of seeing any virtue in a measure of democracy within the church. The political structures of Catholicism remain a curious blend of Roman imperial practices and the trappings of medieval monarchy. As Charles Taylor pointed out, the virtues of the Enlightenment and of modernity—justice, equality, free speech, and so on—are qualities that the church had to learn from secular society and that it could not have found the resources in itself to discover (Taylor, 16–20). Truly, those virtues have been incorporated into much of the wise teaching that the Catholic Church has offered the world at least since the time of Leo XIII, but they are rarely, if ever, employed in its internal life.

John Henry Newman’s observation that during the Arian heresies it was the laity that kept the church in truth, not the clergy, is suggestive in our present

situation. Newman points to the strength of the grassroots, as do many observers of the healthy American church. With large numbers of lay ministers serving in our communities of faith, there is a vibrancy to the best of our parishes that even the clergy shortage cannot entirely spoil. Indeed, at least in the near term, this lack of ordained ministers may be precisely what has reminded the church of the apostolicity of the lay vocation. In the Arian crisis many bishops weakened in their resolve and failed in their responsibility for leadership. The laity stepped in, maintaining the practice of their faith despite poor leadership. Today, it seems, the realities of *communio* are to be found, if anywhere, in the religious life of the local faith community. Such *communio* often exists despite and not because of the leadership in the church.

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The church crisis today is not a threat of heresy. This crisis is occasioned by a fundamental misconception of what is central to the church. Despite the rhetoric of communion ecclesiology that the teachings of Vatican II more or less mandated, the Roman restorationism of the past quarter century has returned us institutionally to where we were before Vatican II. That is a place in which the responsibility of the community to mirror the relationality of the divine life has been overwhelmed by the *wholly* human predilection for rules, regulations, buildings, status, power over others, secrecy, silence, ambition, and expediency. None of this is from God. The German Lutheran theologian Dorothee Soelle did not mince her words when she described this kind of phenomenon as “necrophilia.” She had a point. The church thrives by sharing in the life of God through the body and blood of Christ, not through the dead stuff of institutional bureaucracy.

The “higher” accountability to which the church is called, because it must strive to pattern its own polity on trinitarian relations, is nothing more nor less than holiness. The church is holy insofar as it mirrors and even shares in the divine life. The growth in holiness of the individual Christian is her or his divinization. Poor performance in the lower accountability that we have also identified tends to impede the higher accountability. Good performance of the lower accountability is obviously a *desideratum*, but in itself it is efficiency, not holiness. It is what we expect of any successful corporation. So the way to a greater holiness/accountability in the church can be expressed equally truly in two ways. We can say that what is required is the relativization of structures toward a relational rather than hierarchical community of faith. Or we can say that what we need is to recognize that true hierarchy is ordered relations, not power structures (Gaillardetz, 34–35).

Authority and Democratization: A Test Case for the Higher Accountability

The scandal of sexual abuse has reinvigorated calls in the American Catholic Church for greater democratization, especially for the role of a lay “voice” in financial affairs, in pastoral councils, and in the selection of pastors and bishops.

It is important for liberal and conservative Catholics alike to understand that the debate over authority and democratization is not in the end about political structures in the institution, but about whether the church is a divine or a human reality. Of course it is both, but the insistence on unthinking obedience to a hierarchically structured polity is the reduction of the church to a purely human reality. Curiously, it is the liberal call for more voice for all that is seeking to bring the church closer to the divine life and therefore working for its holiness. Liberals who stop at a simple critique of the dysfunctional elements of our present polity are playing into the hands of the institution by accepting the rules of the game as the institution understands it. “The hierarchy” is God-given, conservative voices will say. “The hierarchy” is a human element in the church and hence changeable, liberals might counter. The truth is that good order in the church *is* God-given, but it is a structure of openness, accountability, and holiness patterned on the divine life, not the pyramid of power that has bedeviled the church since at least the Middle Ages. The good order of the church is not necessarily tied to any particular polity. The trinitarian model we have explored does not necessarily mandate democracy either, but it certainly suggests a strong preference for collaborative engagement with the common tasks of Christian mission.

“Authority” is a characteristic of the whole church insofar as it is holy/accountable/open, on the pattern of the divine life. The mission of different individuals in the church may express that authority of the whole church in different

ways, but it is in virtue of sharing in the authority of the whole church that a bishop or a prophet can claim authority. This approach to authority, for example, lies behind the understanding of papal infallibility as the pope expressing what “has always been the faith of the church,” not deriving or determining interpretations of doctrine on his own authority. The collective authority of the bishops and the practical infallibility of the *sensus fidelium* (the sense of the faithful) are similarly envisaged.

Because the church has lost credibility, it has also lost authority in a world that needs leadership so much. And loss of credibility, in turn, must be put down to a public failure to be a fully open, accountable community. What the world sees is inevitably the failure in lower accountability, with poor episcopal leadership in the sex abuse scandal as the primary example in North America in recent times. In the nineteenth century the racism of the American Catholic Church might have been the public face of lack of accountability. But we in the community of faith can come to understand that such failures in accountability are attributable to our failures in the higher accountability. If we were ready to recognize that the life of the church must seek to mirror the divine life, the lower accountability would mostly take care of itself. Until we take this step we will continue to be embroiled in sterile debates about who is dissenting from what.

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