Accountability in the Church

Report from Chiapas

Richard R. Gaillardetz

The author reflects on his experience concerning issues of church accountability in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, in Chiapas, Mexico. He offers some lessons learned there that are instructive for the Church of North America.

In the last three years we have heard more frequent demands for greater accountability on the part of Catholic church leadership. In the United States this discussion has been precipitated by the clerical sexual abuse scandal that has racked the Catholic Church. Groups like Voice of the Faithful have articulated these demands for accountability consistently and persuasively. We should not imagine, however, that this concern for accountability has its origins in the recent scandals. The scandal has simply fueled a demand for greater accountability that had already been present in the Church. A more active and educated laity in the United States has chafed for decades at their exclusion from many vital decisions that affect them. The clerical sexual abuse scandal simply provided a public forum for articulating these long simmering frustrations. The scandal has expended such vast sums of moral and spiritual capital that church leadership has been forced to give at least lip service to these demands for accountability.

Defining what is meant by accountability has not been easy. It would certainly include a greater openness and transparency in church decision-making. Yet many believe that these values, as Peter Steinfels has put it, are “necessary but not sufficient” (Steinfels, 28). They would insist that there can be no true accountability

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unless there is broader church participation in decision-making processes. Discussion of accountability in the Church is handicapped, however, by the fact that it is a term borrowed from the political and business sectors without strong ecclesiological links. This has led many church leaders to be wary of such language. The bishop of Pittsburgh, Donald Wuerl, relates accountability to questions of church governance and has warned that “when we address accountability in the Church, we must be careful not to use a political model for a reality that transcends human political institutions” (Wuerl, 18). Accountability in the Church differs from its political analogue because the Church is subject to certain God-given constraints:

There are a number of “givens” or facts in our discussion because we are dealing with a divinely established reality. At the same time, there is a need to integrate these “givens” into the circumstances of our day. To understand governance in the Catholic Church, we have to go back to its origin and its divine institution. The Catholic Church was established by Christ and its structure is articulated in two sacraments: baptism and holy orders. The hierarchy and the apostolic tradition are intrinsic to the church. Both have the God-given function of guaranteeing that the saving revelation of Jesus Christ continues to be passed on, made available, and lived in every successive generation. (Wuerl, 13)

Wuerl defines ecclesial accountability in terms of openness and transparency sufficient to allow one to assess whether church leaders are acting in fidelity to their divine mandate. I cite Wuerl because his views reflect a common perspective held by American church leadership. They share a concern for past mistakes made by bishops and are eager to change public perception regarding the exercise of church leadership. Nevertheless for many church leaders the unique status of the Church demands that true episcopal accountability remain primarily vertical. Church leaders must be accountable to God and faithful to the divinely instituted elements of the Church. Church teaching and church structures, to the extent that they are divinely mandated, are not open for debate. Accountability to other church members is limited to our verification, made possible by a more open and transparent leadership style, of the bishops’ fidelity to Christ—to the truth of Christ found in church teaching and to the institutions and structures founded by Christ. Any other horizontal accountability, it would seem, risks an unacceptable importation of secular models of accountability. Accountability to God and accountability to the people are placed in opposition, with the latter reflecting at best an unacceptable “Protestantizing” and at worst a capitulation to the secular world.

In both North America and Western Europe the rise of democratic aspirations in the modern world has often been accompanied by a repudiation of church authority. Conversely, a commitment to religious authority often meant repudiating liberal democracy as was evident in Pope Pius IX’s Syllabus of Errors. Although at the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church left behind its rabid antimodern...
stance, one still finds a great deal of hand wringing about the dangers of importing liberal democratic values into the Church. Again I cite Wuerl:

> There is a temptation to make the church into an American democratic organization as if we, the members, had supreme authority over the body. Thus, we come to the point where we would vote on articles of the Creed, determine not only how faithful we are to the Gospel but also what the message ought to be to satisfy the circumstances of our day. (Wuerl, 17)

This conviction that accountability to God and accountability to the people are opposed to one another has forestalled a vital and much needed ecclesial conversation about the character and limits of church accountability.

Perhaps what is needed is a fresh perspective, an approach to ecclesial accountability that has developed apart from the Enlightenment-inspired binary opposition of democracy and religious authority. I encountered such a perspective in January 2005 when I visited the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, in Chiapas, Mexico. For forty years that diocese had been under the leadership of one bishop until his retirement in 2000, Bishop Samuel Ruiz García. In the balance of this essay I would like to offer a “report from Chiapas” that portrays a quite different cultural and ecclesial context for issues of church accountability, and then conclude with some lessons learned there that might be instructive for the Church of North America.

**Report from Chiapas**

This brief report from Chiapas will offer two perspectives. The first will outline some of the more significant features of the episcopal leadership of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas under Bishop Samuel Ruiz. The second will recount a single event, a deacon formation weekend conducted within the diocese. The Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas is one of three dioceses in Chiapas, the southernmost and poorest state of Mexico. About 80 percent of the diocese is composed of indigenous Mayan peoples. The indigenous belong to the lowest rung of the social ladder in Mexico and have been the victims of well over a century of economic and political repression and human rights violations. When Ruiz was ordained to serve the diocese on the eve of Vatican II, his pastoral plan, such as it was, had three points: (1) teach Spanish to the indigenous peoples, (2) provide them with clothing, (3) improve their diet (Andraos, 94). Religious education was a simple matter of teaching the catechism to the people. What transpired over the following decades was the transformation of both a diocese and its bishop.

By his own account, Ruiz was converted by his people. As he traveled to the hundreds of small communities in the diocese to visit the people, he soon realized that his pastoral initiatives, although well intentioned, were contributing to the
destruction of the indigenous cultures (Ruiz, 599). He began to set up local structures that allowed him to listen to the real needs of the people. He called forth from the local communities catechists and deacons who were trained to bring the Catholic faith into conversation with both the collective wisdom and the concrete concerns of the people.

A decisive turning point in the history of his diocese occurred in 1974. The First Indigenous Congress of Chiapas was conducted to commemorate both the 500th anniversary of the birth of Bartolomé de Las Casas, the first bishop of the diocese, and the 150th anniversary of the annexation of Chiapas to Mexico. Originally convoked by the government, the diocese was soon invited to participate in the preparations for the congress. Local indigenous communities set about an extended planning process and more than two thousand people attended the congress itself (Andraos, 45). The event was dominated by wide ranging discussion regarding the plight of the indigenous peoples, the socio-economic and political sources of their suffering, and their need for greater solidarity. This congress is widely seen as a decisive turning point in the life of the diocese. Ruiz had helped instigate the empowerment of the local people. His subsequent pastoral initiatives would build on that sense of empowerment.

As he grew into his episcopal office, Ruiz would speak with greater frequency of his episcopal ministry as a ministry of “accompaniment” with the people. He realized that ecclesiastical structures like the presbyteral council and diocesan pastoral council were insufficient for establishing the kind of broad-based participation in the life of the diocese that he thought was necessary. These canonically mandated structures could not take into account the great regional diversity of the diocese. So he invited the various regions in his diocese to develop their own pastoral plans as a way of “incarnating” the Gospel in their local communities. In so doing the indigenous communities made use of a traditional Mayan democratic process, the convocation of local assemblies. After over a decade of preparation, a diocesan assembly comprised of leaders from these communities met to approve a diocesan-wide pastoral plan, remarkable for its grassroots origins. A second plan would later emerge out of a diocesan synod held just prior to Ruiz’s retirement.

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Diocesan pastoral initiatives intent upon giving the people a voice and allowing them to speak out regarding their political and economic oppression met, predictably, with government resistance. For example, the bishop supported the indigenous peoples’ call for land reform as nothing more than a demand for justice. This played into the hands of the government, which accused Ruiz and others of fomenting Marxist revolution. In 1991 an influential priest of the diocese, Joél Padron, was arrested as an agitator and held in jail for fifty days. Thousands marched on the state capital in protest, and the result of this widespread mobilization was the creation of an independent lay movement which came to be known as El Pueblo Creyente. The organization’s relationship to the diocese is complex. It is not an official diocesan entity but an autonomous, lay led organization. Yet representatives from this organization participated, when Ruiz was bishop, in the annual diocesan assemblies (Andraos, 121–23).

This form of grassroots consultation and the encouragement of both a genuine inculturation of the Gospel in Mayan culture and a critical analysis of the socio-economic roots of injustice were met with disapproval by government officials who frequently complained to the papal nuncio about Ruiz’s leadership. The 1990s were filled with calls for his resignation and accusations of heterodoxy and the abdication of his ministry as a bishop. Several attempts were made on his life.

Throughout his ministry, Ruiz remained insistent that he was doing no more than applying Vatican II’s imperative to read the signs of the times and allow the Gospel to take root in each culture. He never rejected the priority of the Gospel and the authority of church teaching, but insisted that these needed to take root in the unique situation of each local church. He acknowledged his own episcopal authority but felt that this did not preclude his engagement in substantive consultation with the people he served (Ruiz, 2005).

**Witness of Tekiucum**

The true impact of Ruiz’s episcopal leadership may be more vividly portrayed by turning from this broad overview to a particular experience of the local church that was afforded to me during my time there. In January 2005 I was part of a small delegation of scholars and students who were invited to visit the small hamlet of Tekiucum to witness a three-day formation process for deacon candidates. In order to appreciate what transpired there, some background is necessary.

In the Diocese of San Cristóbal, as a consequence of Ruiz’s bold vision, there are now approximately 8,000 catechists (mostly indigenous and about 1,000 of whom are women), 340 indigenous deacons and 80 priests working in the diocese. The ministry of the catechists, pre-deacons (deacon candidates) and deacons was developed in a unique way under Don Samuel’s leadership. The result has been a ministerial leadership structure that is flexible and draws considerably from the
cultural resources of the Mayans. Catechists are not recruited by parish priests or diocesan personnel, but rather are called forth by the community and particularly by the community’s tribal elders.

The discernment process for calling forth catechists and deacon candidates has both communal and personal dimensions. The communal dimension is reflected in the expectation that the community, recognizing the candidate’s experience and wisdom, will call them forth and support their journey toward this new service to the community. The personal dimension is reflected in the significant role given to the interpretation of dreams. For the Mayan peoples, dreams and dream interpretation are a vital medium for communication with the divine. Many catechists and deacons recount having their vocation confirmed through a dream.

Local catechists have significant responsibilities. They preach, teach, visit, and pray with the sick. If members of their community are sick for an extended period, they may organize community assistance in the harvesting of the family’s crops. At one point during the weekend formation process we attended, the work of the meeting was interrupted by news that a respected matron in the community known to be quite ill was now on her deathbed. Our entire assembly immediately departed, mostly on foot, for the three-mile journey on slippery clay paths to her family’s modest wooden hut. There we found family and friends waiting outside for their spiritual leaders to arrive. The religious leaders stayed and prayed at her bedside in that smoky, crowded hut for several hours before making the three-mile journey back to the chapel to complete the formation process.

Since the opportunity to celebrate Mass with a visiting priest is relatively rare, the catechists often preside at communion services. Deacon candidates and deacons do many of these same things but also baptize, witness weddings, and preside at funerals. Catechists generally only minister within their own geographic community, while deacon candidates and deacons will often travel from community to community.

The communal discernment process focuses on whether candidates possess a special charism for leading the community in prayer. This is no small thing as the indigenous communities take communal prayer quite seriously and can pray together for hours on end. The catechist/deacon is often one in the community known to be able to pray from their “heart.” Indeed, the image of the “heart” is central to the indigenous spirituality. They often speak of “seeing into another person’s heart.”
Throughout the formation process, deacon candidates are generally accompanied in their formation process by an elder in the community, male or female.

Elders, deacon candidates and spouses began to arrive between 9 and 11 a.m. Many had arisen early in the morning to walk as much as four hours to attend the meeting. The priest of this parish (the parish is seated in the larger town of Chenalho and covers a vast territory that includes numerous smaller Christian communities) also arrives. The parish priest comes from one of the indigenous communities there (which is fairly rare) and is quite young.

The meeting began with a late breakfast. As guests, we were greeted in Tzotzil (the language of one of the four main Mayan groups in the region), first by the deacon candidate who was facilitating the weekend, and then by his wife, a woman who was quite animated and was herself a local catechist. After the introductions and greeting, one of the elder deacon candidates presided over the community’s opening prayer. All knelt facing the Blessed Sacrament, and the deacon candidate initially led us in reciting several traditional Catholic prayers in Spanish (e.g., the Our Father). This was followed by a cacaphony of spontaneous prayer in Tzotzil. After an extended time of prayer the community set about organizing the day’s schedule, which was time-consuming. Communal decision-making is deeply rooted in the Mayan heritage and it is one of the most characteristic features of these community gatherings. All decisions are made communally and each person has the right to “speak their word.” Once the schedule for the day was agreed upon by all, we participated in a traditional Mayan dance to “seal the decision” and to “animate our spirits” for the rest of the process.

Later in the day the community undertook another discussion regarding the next day’s schedule. A decision was made to begin with a morning prayer conducted outdoors on the mountain as their ancient Mayan ancestors did. The Mayan peoples continue to believe that angels abide on the mountaintops and so prayer on the mountain is considered particularly efficacious. Money was then collected to purchase candles to be used in the morning prayer. We retired that night with all of us sleeping on bedrolls atop the pine-scented floor of the chapel.

We arose in the morning to face yet another decision. It was raining outside and some thought it unwise to go ahead with the mountain prayer. After all had spoken it was decided to pray in the chapel. Early afternoon saw the arrival of the deacon candidate who had decided to drop out of the formation process. He addressed the community, explaining that he had decided not to continue because of an extended dispute he and his wife had with the parish priest, the precise nature of which was never made clear. His wife was quite adamant about not continuing and he was inclined to agree with her. He came to the meeting, he said, only because he was instructed to do so by God in a dream. After his explanation he sat down. Members of the community were invited to offer their word. A number of them did so, and one of the most respected elders continued on for approximately fifteen minutes. The candidate was both admonished for not consulting the community
before making such a decision and encouraged to persevere in the process. Then
the elders turned to address the priest with whom the candidate had had a dispute.
They admonished him for his failure to fulfill his role as spiritual leader of the
community. At the end the priest rose and gave a very moving speech in which
he asked for forgiveness from both the offended deacon candidate, his wife, and
the community for his role in this dispute. This long communal process of reconciliation was then “sealed” by another communal dance.

Although our delegation had to depart that evening, the process would continue for another day. One of the most striking differences between this diaconal formation process and that with which most of us in the delegation were familiar was the pronounced emphasis on communal prayer and faith sharing over formal theological input. These candidates were being formed for a ministry of accompaniment with their people that had been modeled for them by their bishop and the roots of which went deep within their own cultural heritage. It is no surprise that deacons were referred to by the Mayan term *tuhuneles*, servants.

Lessons from Chiapas

This “report from Chiapas” may appear romantic and even utopian. It is true that at times I wondered whether I was being given a privileged glimpse of what Christianity might have looked like in the early centuries. Yet the Diocese of San Cristóbal is not without its difficulties. First there is the continued abject poverty that afflicts the people. Civic unrest and violent skirmishes are a daily reality there. The federal government turns a blind eye to the problems that remain and refuses to accept the role its neoliberal economic policies have played in perpetuating the injustice that fuels much of the violence. Within the Church, not all Catholics agreed with the pastoral vision of Ruiz. The more wealthy mestizo minority has been quite vocal in its protests regarding what they see as the politicization of the Gospel. The new bishop, at the Vatican’s insistence, has put a break on many of the pastoral initiatives encouraged by Ruiz. In particular, he has been told not to ordain any more permanent deacons, since the large numbers of deacons there risks obscuring the unique role of the priest.

I offered this extended account of the Diocese of San Cristóbal because there, for all its continuing difficulties, I encountered a church that embodied a vision of Christian community constituted by three levels of ecclesial accountability. The first level establishes a pneumatocentric ecclesiology in which accountability to God meant, concretely, listening to the Spirit speaking through the community. The second level attends to the consequences of such an ecclesiology for the ministry of the bishop. The third level calls for a mutual accountability which calls each member of the community to ongoing conversion. Let us consider these in further detail.
Whenever issues of accountability emerge in the North American Church one is likely to be warned of the limits of horizontal accountability, like those offered by Bishop Wuerl. Clear boundaries for church discourse are established by a set of “givens” imposed by Christ on the Church. Church doctrine comes to us from Christ and is therefore not subject to discussion. Church structures such as the papacy and the episcopate were instituted by Christ and therefore cannot be challenged. The sacramental structure of the Church, again established by Christ, can develop and change only in its accidental features. The primary accountability of the Church and its leadership is to these Christological givens. Little is left for free discussion by the baptized.

It should not surprise us then that so much discussion regarding accountability in the Church in North America has centered on financial matters. It is one of the few areas of church life where input from the laity has actually been canonically mandated in the form of diocesan finance councils.

By contrast, what I encountered in Chiapas was a much more pneumatocentric vision of the Church. To be sure, I did not hear any denial of the Christological “givens” of divine revelation. No one proposed a church whose central convictions were “up for grabs” or subject to polling. What I encountered was a vision of Christian community incarnated in the Mayan culture. This vision creatively integrated a Mayan commitment to communal decision-making and celebration with a Christian expectation of the presence and guidance of the Spirit in the life of the Church. Everyone’s “word” must be heard and honored, and all decisions are “sealed by the Spirit” through communal dance. This pneumatocentric ecclesiology had striking resonances with the Church recounted in the Acts of the Apostles. At the “council of Jerusalem” the judgment of the community leadership on the mission of Paul and Barnabas was articulated as follows: “It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us . . .” (Acts 15:28).

Accountability to the Spirit looks quite different from accountability to a set of Christological givens. Accountability to the Spirit requires that one first ask, “Where is the Spirit to be encountered?” These communities readily accepted the presence of the Spirit in the Scriptures, church teaching, and the sacraments, but they were equally committed to the presence of the Spirit in their midst. For the small group we encountered in Tekiucum, accountability to the Spirit meant a commitment to extended communal prayer. It was this commitment to prayer and
the communal sensibility of the Mayan culture that served as checks against any liberal democratic majoritarianism. In the community discussions, what one heard was a “word” spoken by each but believed to come from the Spirit. This accountability to the Spirit was built on a praxis of communal discernment grounded in prayer and a confidence in God’s presence with God’s people.

**Episcopal “Accompaniment”**

Reading the many writings and interviews of Bishop Ruiz, one cannot help but be struck by his unique understanding of his own episcopal leadership. In my experience in the United States, bishops who have a reputation as genuinely consultative are sometimes considered weak in certain ecclesiastical circles. By contrast, one of the most striking features of the leadership of Don Samuel was the willingness to listen combined with the courage to speak the truth, to the people, to the government, and even, if necessary, to other church leaders. The accountability to the Spirit dominant in his diocese went hand in hand with Ruiz’s understanding of episcopal leadership as “accompaniment.” He recognized the unique responsibilities thrust upon him as bishop, but these responsibilities were undertaken with a commitment to learn from the people. His leadership was fueled by the convictions of the people and his confidence that the Spirit spoke through them. This is reflected in his support of independent lay groups like *El Pueblo Creyente* and in his decision to cede to local communities considerable control over the process of calling forth candidates to the diaconate. Reflecting on that process, Ruiz observed:

> This is part of a new model of church that we are seeing. Because the deacons in these cases were appointed by their communities, and we were speaking of the incarnation of a model of church that was not the Western model but a church incarnated in the culture. It is a new model of church, and that is how Rome understands it, and that is why they are trying to stop it. Because obviously there are decisions that I used to take, and now the community is participating. That happens also with the priests in the diocese. I had the last word, but obviously I did consultations, and after that I would say, well, this is what we are going to do with the consensus of everybody. (Ruiz, 2005)

If the commitment to horizontal accountability recalls the Spirit-centered ecclesiology of Acts of the Apostles, Ruiz’s understanding of episcopal accompaniment and openness to learning from the people recalls the convictions of one of the great bishops of our ancient tradition, St. Cyprian of Carthage.

Cyprian was hardly a weak bishop. This third-century leader insisted that one must be united with the bishop to be united with the Church. He was even willing
to confront the bishop of Rome when necessary. Yet this advocate of strong episcopal leadership could also write the following to his clergy:

... from the beginning of my episcopate, I decided to do nothing of my own opinion privately without your advice and the consent of the people. When I come to you through the grace of God, then we shall discuss in common either what has been done or what must be done concerning these matters, as our mutual honor demands. (Epistle 14, 4)

Elsewhere he would reflect on the attitudes proper to a bishop:

The blessed apostle Paul foresaw this when he wrote to Timothy with the admonition that a bishop should be not wrangling or quarrelsome but gentle and teachable. Now a man is teachable if he is meek and gentle and patient in learning. It is thus a bishop's duty not only to teach but also to learn. For he becomes a better teacher if he makes daily progress and advancement in learning what is better. (Epistle 74, 10)

It is safe to say that much of our present church polity in North America is as far removed from the vision of this third-century bishop as it is from that of a contemporary bishop like Ruiz. When bishops are appointed from above with little input from the local church, when they are accountable to no one but the pope who appointed them, when widespread consultation is confused with polling or democratic balloting, when secrecy is maintained, not out of a concern for victims but to protect the guilty, then episcopal accountability, so vital to the life of the early church, is lost.

**Accountability and Conversion**

Finally, it is impossible to ignore the ecclesial implications of the moving spectacle of mutual accountability displayed in the community gathered at Tekiuicum. As I watched the community’s confrontation of both the deacon candidate and the priest, I could not help transposing that conflict to the Church in North America. I have seen countless conflicts of this sort, but their resolution went along very different lines. First, when an individual decides to drop out of a formation process, the first inclination of others would be to support that individual’s decision. This is a consequence of our default belief that vocational discernment is ultimately a private matter between the individual and God. This default belief has also contributed to the uneven quality of our ministers. We think it inappropriate for the community to test that vocation. The community gathered at Tekiuicum saw things differently. They did not hesitate to admonish the candidate.
for making such an important decision without consulting the community and seeking its corporate wisdom in the matter.

Second, at least prior to our recent clerical sexual abuse scandal, few communities in the North American Catholic Church would consider it their right and obligation to challenge the conduct of an ordained priest. We might complain, gossip, or gripe to others in the community; we might even refuse to contribute to the collection. We might even write a letter to our bishop or to Rome. Yet, in spite of the firm biblical foundation for such communal action, few of our communities would feel sufficiently empowered and confident that they are the Church as to confront a leader for acting in ways counter to the Gospel. And if such a community were to feel so empowered and act on that empowerment, in most instances the communal confrontation of an ordained leader’s misconduct would be greeted with shock, anger, and appeals to the prerogatives of office.

At Tekiucum I saw a community that embodied the council’s teaching that we are a pilgrim Church, a people on a journey. They understood that all were called to holiness, and that holiness could best be deepened through immersion in the life of the community. Two members of the community, one a deacon candidate and the other a parish priest, readily submitted themselves to the admonitions and exhortations of the community. It is difficult to know which was more remarkable about the encounter in Tekiucum—the community’s willingness to confront the priest or the priest’s humble acceptance of the criticism and request for forgiveness. They understood the meaning of the Letter to the Ephesians’ call for mutual subordination in the life of faith.

Perhaps the most important thing to be learned from the Church in Chiapas is that one’s understanding of ecclesial accountability depends on one’s vision of the Church. It is not enough, from the side of church leadership, to limit accountability to greater transparency in decision-making, as important as this is. For those offended by the misuse of authority, it is not enough to call for an ecclesial set of checks and balances, as helpful as those might be. What is demanded is an ecclesial vision that recognizes first the priority of baptism over holy orders. This priority allows for the distinctive leadership of the ordained but reminds church leaders that their fundamental identity comes from their baptism. Consequently their ministry is always subject to the scrutiny of the community of the baptized.

Perhaps the most important thing to be learned from the Church in Chiapas is that one’s understanding of ecclesial accountability depends on one’s vision of the Church.
Second, we must develop a vision of the Church as subject to Christ and animated by the Spirit. Faithful obedience to Christ will be incarnated in practices of communal discernment that look for, not the majority of individual opinions, but the gentle voice of the Spirit of Christ speaking through a faith-filled people. When all in the Church come to discover the dignity and demands of their baptism and the concrete shape of discipleship in service of the Spirit’s promptings, accountability becomes simply another word for koinonia, our shared communion in Christ.

References


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