Dr. Hinze explains why the U.S. Catholic bishops have changed their style of teaching concerning significant social issues and other topics of our time. He shows the challenges presented by the bishops’ former method and their present manner of teaching.

In the 1980s the U.S. bishops experimented with a new way of preparing episcopal letters as they sought to address current issues on war and peace, the economy, and the changing role of women in the church and society. Their pioneering approach reveals a particular U.S. reception and implementation of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council on pastoral leadership and the nature of the church. What distinguished the practices devised by the bishops was the extent to which they fashioned open consultative and collaborative procedures for deliberating about pressing pastoral issues. They provide an important example of the postconciliar development of a dialogical approach to ecclesial discernment and decision-making. This took creative imagination and courage on the part of the bishops and involved no small amount of risk. The result, beginning with The Challenge of Peace, was the development of an innovative method of learning and teaching by the church;

*Bradford Hinze* is professor of theology at Fordham University, New York. His most recent book is *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church: Aims and Obstacles, Lessons and Laments* (Continuum, 2006). Dr. Hinze’s e-mail address is: bhinze@fordham.edu.
one might call it a distinct style of leadership inspired by the style of the documents of Vatican II (O’Malley, 23, 28). This way of exercising leadership had an effect by imitation on how some bishops collaborated in their own dioceses with diocesan pastoral councils, presbyteral councils, and diocesan synods. It likewise inspired priests to develop comparable ways of working with their parish councils and leadership teams in such a way as to invite wide participation by the members of their parish community. This contributed to changes in U.S. Catholic culture.

After the women’s pastoral was rejected—a topic that will not be treated here yet merits far greater scrutiny—specific practices associated with the innovative way of generating episcopal letters were curtailed and some stopped altogether. This was in large part a direct result of questions and criticisms raised by Roman curial officials who remained committed to a traditional hierarchical style of pastoral leadership, one that allows only a restricted role for consultation and collaboration with the laity, theologians, and other experts. This Roman style of leadership has been fostered and imitated by U.S. bishops and priests and become more prevalent. The two styles reflected in these U.S. pastoral letters and the subsequent Roman critique reflect contrasting receptions and interpretations of the teachings of Vatican II.

*The Challenge of Peace,* it can be argued, represents the challenge of consultative and collaborative discernment and decision-making in the church. In 1986, Bishop James Malone, then president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, clearly articulated the significance of the U.S. bishops’ effort:

Together as a national hierarchy, we have found a new and collegial method of teaching. For centuries, hierarchies have been publishing pastoral letters, but for the first time the people of God have been involved in the formation in a more intense manner. For the first time, the church has taught not simply through a finished product, but through the process that led to the finished document.
Teaching is not a unilateral activity. One is only teaching if someone is being taught. Teaching and learning are mutually conditional. (Malone, 395)

This initiative of the U.S. bishops was inspired by the teachings of the Second Vatican Council about collegiality, consultation, and collaboration with laity, religious, and ordained members of the church community. Likewise, it exemplifies the bishops’ effort to engage the wider civic community following *Gaudium et Spes* and the longer tradition of Catholic social teaching, by creating a public forum where people from various sectors of civic society could voice their opinion and thereby provide a framework for constructive public debate about important matters concerning the common good (Hehir, 40–43).

Although clearly inspired by and indebted to the council, these new practices reflect a distinctive U.S. reception of Vatican II informed by the history and ethos of the U.S. as a sovereign people living in a democracy who attach great importance to open public discourse and debate about matters of common concern,
where people are invited to contribute to forming public opinion and work toward consensus on disputed topics. This achievement by the U.S. bishops offers an important ecclesial example of what Charles Taylor has described as a “social imaginary”—a creative reception of aspects of cultural traditions (in this case Catholic and U.S.) brought together to advance ecclesial practices that contribute to a growing sense of legitimacy and credibility for the pastoral teaching of the U.S. Catholic Church and the episcopacy in particular (Taylor, 23–30).

Whatever happened to this particular social imaginary? It was undermined by the relentless promotion of a contrasting Roman social imaginary that has been imitated by significant numbers of a new generation of bishops and priests. The dynamic mimesis of consultative and collaborative leadership has been supplanted by the mimesis of the traditional practices associated with centralized hierarchical clerical authority.

*What Distinguishes the U.S. Bishops’ New Way of Teaching?*

Since the establishment of the National Catholic Conference of Bishops in the late 1960s, a standard procedure has been used to generate official pastoral teachings. The staff of one of the committees, such as the Committee on Social Development and World Peace, would draft a document usually based on informal input from individuals or a small group of experts in theology or public policy. The draft would be submitted to the bishops on that committee and at times to other experts for reactions, which might become proposed amendments. The text and amendments would subsequently be discussed and voted upon by the full assembly of the bishops.

During the preparation of *The Challenge of Peace*, between 1980 and 1983, several innovations in the process were introduced. The first was that much wider consultation took place before the document was drafted. When it was announced that the bishops wanted to address the issue of war and peace, a variety of people expressed their desire to voice views on this matter—people from the church community and from the wider civic community, including government officials. In response the bishops held public forums, which took place with one major stipulation, that “the witnesses were selected to provide the committee with a spectrum of views and diverse forms of professional and pastoral experience” (U.S. Bishops’ Conference, 326). People holding contrasting points of view offered their opinions, bishops listened and asked questions, and the ensuing public discussion informed the preparation of the first draft document, which was completed in time for the summer meeting of the U.S. bishops in July 1982.

The second innovation was that the draft document, which had been previously kept confidential and distributed only to the bishops and selected experts, was
leaked to the press (Kari, 74–75). Instead of reacting to this breach of protocol by reestablishing the old order of limited disclosure of their deliberations, the bishops opted for greater transparency: subsequent drafts were published by the U.S. Catholic Bishops in Origins, their documentary news service. As a result these documents were commented upon in secular and religious newspapers and journals; they were discussed and debated at public conferences, in classroom settings, and at parishes. They came to inform public opinion in local churches and parishes and influenced the wider civic debate.

The third innovation was that the bishops provided opportunities for wider circles of people both within the church and outside the church to offer their reactions to the first draft, which in turn influenced the revisions of the document. This was a crucial development. Bishops expressed their openness to receiving feedback, positive or negative. They were willing to be held accountable for what they had written. Such feedback provided information about how their message was being received, interpreted, and evaluated. The responses did not provide a procedural democratic vote on the document, nor did they offer definitive proof of the document’s effectiveness or its deficiencies. Rather, the drafting committee pondered the varied information received and crafted the second draft document in light of this information.

These new procedures were subsequently repeated: the second draft was made public in October 1982, and the feedback procedure was again employed, which in turn influenced the third draft. The third draft was released in April 1983. It was then discussed, final amendments were voted upon, and the final document was approved by the bishops at their May 1983 meeting.

The pastoral letter on war and peace, on the economy, and on women, each has its own history, but this new pattern of operation was followed for all three documents: open dialogue among the bishops and members of the Catholic community, and with representatives of the wider society in the preparation of the documents; public disclosure and discussion of the drafted texts; and revisions of the documents in light of these discussions. This offered a new way of exercising authority consultatively and collaboratively with various sectors of the Catholic community and by means of actively engaging interested groups in the wider public in society—political, business, and academic. This way of exercising episcopal authority offered greater transparency and promoted co-responsibility and mutual accountability; the document, as a result, had more substance, stronger argumentation, and increased credibility.

Why Was This New Pedagogical Practice Criticized?

Curial officials raised various kinds of questions about pastoral letters on war and peace, economics, and women. So-called “ecclesiological problems” associated with the process employed in drafting these letters concern us here.
A meeting was held in Rome at the invitation of curial officials on January 18–19, 1983, between the U.S. bishops’ committee on the war and peace pastoral, and representatives of the Curia and of episcopal conferences throughout Western Europe. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger began the meeting by raising the issue of the teaching authority of the bishops’ conference:

A bishops’ conference as such does not have a *mandatum docendi*. This belongs only to the individual bishops or the college of bishops with the pope. When a bishop exercises his teaching authority for his diocese, his statements are binding in conscience. Taking into account that the stated purpose of the U.S. pastoral letter is to form individual consciences and to offer moral guidance in a public policy debate, how can it be made clear when, in a statement of a bishops’ conference, the bishops are speaking as bishops who intend thereby to exercise their teaching authority? (Schotte, 692)

The discussion on this point at that meeting was summarized as follows:

When bishops propose the doctrine of the church, the faithful are bound in conscience to assent. . . . The concluding pages of the draft [on war and peace] seem ambiguous when they refer to pluralism of opinions on the matters touched upon in the pastoral and at the same time urge substantial consensus. Substantial consensus must be based on doctrine and does not flow from debate. It is wrong to propose the teaching of the bishops merely as a basis for debate; the teaching ministry of the bishops means that they lead the people of God and therefore their teaching should not be obscured or reduced to one element among several in a free debate. (Schotte, 693)

These concerns about whether public discussion and debate have any role in the pedagogy employed by episcopal conferences were brought up by curial officials again and again in the years that followed, until the failure of the women’s pastoral letter (November 1992), which was the last time this process was employed.

In March of 1989 a special meeting on the theme of evangelization was held between the Pope, thirty-five U.S. cardinals and archbishops, and twenty-five members of the Curia. The U.S. bishops’ new way of teaching was again a topic of conversation. During the meeting, Cardinal Ratzinger delivered a brief lecture on “The Bishop as Teacher of Faith.” He drew attention to the importance of the role of the bishops as shepherds, quoting a passage from *Lumen Gentium* (20): “This sacred synod teaches that by divine institution bishops have succeeded to the place of the apostles as shepherds of the church, and he who hears them, hears Christ.” Ratzinger offered a commentary on this passage:

‘The pastoral ministry,’ the shepherd’s office, is explained through the notion of hearing. One is a shepherd according to the mind of Jesus Christ, then, inasmuch
as he brings people to the hearing of Christ. In the background here the words of the prologue of John’s Gospel calling Christ the Logos can be heard; resonant too is the ancient Christian idea that it is precisely the Logos who is the shepherd of men, guiding us sheep who have gone astray to the pastures of truth and giving us there the water of life. To be shepherds, then, means to give voice to the Logos, voice to the redeeming Word. (Ratzinger, 681)

Ratzinger goes on to point out that a particular danger in the postconciliar exercise of episcopacy is a diminishment of the ancient role of the Christian bishops to one similar to that of the mebaqqer of the Qumran community who acted as pastoral “supervisors.” Instead of preaching the redeeming Word with decisiveness, the contemporary bishop reflects the Qumran spiritual administrator who is being pressured to avoid polarizations, to appear as a moderator acting within the plurality of existing opinions, but he himself is not to become “partisan” in any substantive way. . . . Why to so large an extent have we bishops acquiesced in this reduction of our office to the inspector, the moderator, the mebaqqer? Why have we gone back to Qumran when it comes to this essential point of the New Testament? (Ratzinger, 681–82)

It is hard not to read this as a critique of the U.S. bishops’ new teaching method, regardless of whether it accurately portrays their practice, which I seriously doubt.

The post-conference statement by Archbishop John May, then president of the U.S. bishops’ conference, indicates that their new process of generating episcopal teaching was indeed at issue: Clearly, there were some differences of perspective in the room . . . but these differences have to do with approach and not with doctrine. The church’s teaching is universal; the bishops of the United States work to support, defend and promote the teaching as do the curia officials in Rome. Many of the factors that make America distinctive are the ones that make her great—the freedom of thought and expression, the pluralism of cultures and religions, the democratic spirit which values the opinion of each individual. America is a ‘market-place society,’ where ideas have to sell themselves on their own intrinsic merit. That this would conflict at times with the hierarchical nature of the church is not surprising. What we came to Rome to say (and it was received calmly and well) was that this spirit of America must influence our own approach in the States. Though the teaching of the church is one and universal, our approach to presenting this teaching must be custom-fitted to the United States. (May, 726)

One year after this meeting in Rome, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith again expressed apprehensions in a written response to the U.S. bishops
after the second draft of the pastoral letter on women’s issues appeared in April 1990. And on May 28–29, 1991, for the third time in three years, the Curia intervened to address “ecclesiological problems” concerning the U.S. bishops’ teaching procedures by convening an international consultation to discuss with U.S. representatives the second draft of the women’s document.

Three issues can be identified in these repeated exchanges. The first issue pertains to the teaching authority of individual bishops and of the universal and ordinary magisterium in relation to that of episcopal conferences. Do episcopal conferences, as an institution established to promote collegiality among bishops, have a collective *mandatum docendi*? Bishops are exhorted in the documents of Vatican II to cultivate closer collegial relations (*collegialis affectus*) among bishops, and they also have authority to engage in practices of collegial discernment and decision-making in councils and synods (*collegialis effectus*). Representatives of the Curia and John Paul II argued that national and regional episcopal conferences are a reflection of the collegial spirit, but that they do not have a mandate to teach and to render collegial acts (Congregation for Bishops, 733–35; John Paul II 1998, 8, 2003, 63). During the same time when the Curia was emphasizing the ontological and temporal priority of the universal church in relation to local, regional, and national churches, they were unwilling to acknowledge that the pastoral teaching of episcopal conferences was to some degree and in certain respects a genuine collegial act, even though not equivalent to that of ecumenical councils.

The second issue, related to the first, concerns the particular levels and kinds of teaching being drawn upon and developed in these pastoral letters. One of the major arguments advanced by the U.S. bishops in defense of their consultative and collaborative method of teaching was to defend a distinction between unchanging or more stable doctrines on the one hand and practical and pastoral applications in national contexts on the other. The bishops maintained that during the preparation of these pastoral letters the door had not been opened to disagreements about dogmas and dogmatic principles, the province of the universal and ordinary magisterium. Yet they insisted there must be room for wide-ranging discussions and debates in a process of collective discernment about how to apply these dogmatic principles in practical living. This kind of communal dialogical process, the U.S. bishops contended, does not undermine the deepest convictions of faith, but in fact can bolster their credibility.

Although the first and second issues were most prominent in the formal discussions between curial officials and the U.S. bishops, a third topic can be judged more central and encompassing: the contrast between two different styles of
exercising episcopal leadership and church pedagogy. The Roman style emphasizes a traditional approach to episcopal hierarchical authority, which leaves little room for wide consultation and collaboration with other members of the church community, not to mention the wider civic community. The approach experimented with by the U.S. bishops was more synodal and conciliar in nature by being more consultative and collaborative. The new way of teaching was not intended to call into question the official Catholic position about the hierarchical nature of the church at the level of principle, but rather to create a context and frame of reference for the members of the church to gather together in some cases with people from the wider civic community to discuss and think with each other about a certain teaching so as to learn from each other and thus find more effective ways to communicate the church’s teaching and strengthen it if need be. Both the Roman and the U.S. approaches are intent on preserving and enhancing the authority of the church’s teaching. The conflict centers upon the way in which episcopal authority is bestowed, generated, and best exercised.

**What Was the Aftermath of the Experiment?**

After the failure of the women’s pastoral, the U.S. bishops abandoned the practice of using the process that they had experimented with during the 1980s. The bishops chose not to dedicate themselves to addressing public issues by extending the experiment with this particular kind of pedagogical practice with members of the church community and the wider civic community to other social issues (such as on racism and intercultural conflict, the environment, or health care, for example). Nor have the bishops used this method to consult and collaborate with members of the church community on important church matters (youth culture, religious education, or liturgy, for instance). The bishops, in matters ecclesial and social, returned to their older standard practices.

The U.S. bishops have not abandoned dialogical methods altogether. They still collaborate with selected theologians and consult with representatives of the people of God. They have continued to experiment with different models of dialogical practices; for example, the Committee on Laity employed surveys and widespread consultations in the generation of the report, “Lay Ecclesial Ministry: The State of the Question,” issued in 1999, and the reports on Diocesan/Eparchial Pastoral Councils and Parish Pastoral Councils in 1997 and 2004; the Department of Social Development and World Peace fostered consultations in preparation for the National Catholic Celebration of Justice Meeting in 1999; and the Committee on Marriage and Family Life initiated in 2005 a new multiyear national pastoral initiative on the institution and sacrament of marriage. But in each one of these cases, consultation and collaboration took place in a dramatically curtailed manner in comparison with the procedures used in the preparation of the three pastoral
letters; and while there may be some consultation, there were no draft documents made public, no feedback procedures utilized, and the bishops remained a step removed from the learning process. Whether their use of different, smaller-scale dialogical methods, conducted with either many fewer or no public procedures, is judged as practical decisions made by the bishops tailored to particular new issues and situations, or an unambiguous return to an older approach to exercising episcopal authority, the main conclusion is the same. The distinctive features of the innovative procedure used in The Challenge of Peace have not been in evidence since the demise of the women’s pastoral.

The Challenge of Peace symbolizes the challenge of dialogical discernment and decision-making in the church. It remains a challenge because there is an ongoing conflict in the church between two different styles of leadership: one that continues to promote widespread consultation and collaboration in the process of pastoral leadership, and another that takes a traditional approach to leadership in the church—centralized, hierarchical, and clerical. This conflict is not only in evidence in how the U.S. episcopal conference does its work, but also in how individual bishops work with their diocesan pastoral councils, presbyteral councils, and in diocesan synods, and priests with their parish councils and communities.

Five years after the episcopal letter on war and peace was released, the bishops issued a reflection on the reaction to that document. “When we began to write our letter, we had no idea of the attention and activity it would generate” (U.S. Bishops 1988, 131). As they recount, the letter was widely read and discussed in dioceses and parishes, in schools, colleges, and universities, and it contributed to broader public debate and decision making. The credibility and effectiveness of this finished document is a testimony to the process that was used to generate it. The Challenge of Peace remains an invitation to further this social imaginary by means of further practical experimentation.

References


