Theology and Renewing the Structure of the Petrine Office

**UT UNUM SINT AND THE BEGINNINGS OF DIALOGUE**

In his encyclical *Ut unum sint*, Pope John Paul II acknowledged that a major obstacle to church unity is the papacy. He invited leaders and theologians of all Christian Churches to engage with him “in a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject, a dialogue in which, leaving useless controversies behind, we could listen to one another, keeping before us only the will of Christ for his church . . . .” (n. 94).

John Quinn, retired archbishop of San Francisco was one of the first to respond to this invitation. Others have since joined the dialogue (Buckley; MacEoin; Pottmeyer; Puglisi; Schatz; Zagano and Tilley).

Several concerns are commonly expressed. One is papal centralization, the absorption of all ecclesiastical authority in the papal office (Pottmeyer: 18–19). Another is papal absolutism (Pottmeyer: 28–33), which tends to locate the papal office outside and above the Church. Canon, 333, 3 states, “There is neither appeal nor recourse against a decision or decree of the Roman Pontiff.” In theory, papal authority is limited (Granfield). In practice the pope functions as an absolute monarch (Quinn: 96–97). A third concern is micromanagement, the failure to respect the principle of subsidiarity in the governance of the Church. Through the operation of the curia, papal authority is introduced into situations and matters which could most appropriately be dealt with by bishops, metropolitans, or episcopal conferences (Quinn: 151–64). Finally, the Roman curia is a bureaucracy which has developed its own agenda, namely, to preserve the Church from change and to maintain and enhance the power it exercises in the name of the pope. It continues to interpose itself between the pope and the bishops, thus displacing the bishops as the principal advisers of the pope.

**PROPOSALS FOR REFORM OR CHANGE**

Archbishop Quinn has proposed specific reforms. First, papal centralization must be reversed by developing institutions which give concrete effect to the doctrine of episcopal collegiality, e.g., episcopal conferences and the Synod of Bishops (Quinn: 102–16).

Second, bishops should be appointed in a way that gives the clergy and people of the diocese, as well as the bishops of the province to
which a diocese belongs, effective input in the selection of the person to be chosen (Quinn: 128–39).

Third, the College of Cardinals is “a college within a college, in a sense making the rest of the College of Bishops a body of second rank” (Quinn: 143). It needs re-thinking and the process of electing the pope needs to be opened up to participation by leaders of episcopal conferences, lay people, and the diocese of Rome (Quinn: 143–53).

Finally, the Roman curia needs to be thoroughly reformed by (1) reducing the number of bishops and clergy and introducing more lay people into the central governance of the Church; (2) limiting the terms of members of the curia to diminish the “[p]roprietary instincts and the feeling of having all the answers . . . nourished by extended tenure” (Quinn: 174); (3) improving the process of selecting members of the curia by soliciting input from the local church of the prospective member; and (4) establishing a commission for the reform of the curia because of the complexity and size of the task (Quinn: 171–77). “The overall goal of curial reform is decentralization, susidiarity, and collegiality” (Quinn: 176).

THE PRIMACY: OBSTACLE TO STRUCTURES FOR COMMUNION

The nature of the Church as a universal communion of churches requires a unity that respects diversity. The Petrine ministry exists to safeguard and promote communion in faith and charity. To render the Petrine office a servant of communion rather than a source of division, the Pope himself says:

All this [the tasks of the Petrine ministry], however, must always be done in communion (emphasis added). When the Catholic Church affirms that the office of the bishop of Rome corresponds to the will of Christ, she does not separate this office from the mission entrusted to the whole body of bishops, who are also “vicars and ambassadors of Christ.” The bishop of Rome is a member of the “college,” and the bishops are his brothers in the ministry. . . . I am convinced that I have a particular responsibility in this regard, above all in acknowledging the ecumenical aspirations of the majority of the Christian communities and in heeding the request made of me to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation (no. 95).

However, good intentions are not enough. They must have institutional form. Synodal structures are needed to give concrete effect to the collegiality.

But, truly synodal and conciliar structures would seem to be excluded by the way Vatican Council I defines papal primacy:
that this power of jurisdiction of the Roman Pontiff, which is truly episcopal, is immediate; to which all, of whatever rite and dignity, both pastors and faithful, both individually and collectively, are bound by their duty of hierarchical subordination and true obedience, to submit, not only in matters which pertain to faith and morals, but also in those that pertain to the discipline and government of the Church throughout the world, so that the Church of Christ may be one flock under one supreme pastor through the preservation of unity both of communion and of profession of the same faith with the Roman Pontiff (Neuner and Roos: 224–25).

The severity of the definition of papal primacy suggests an absoluteness that brooks no limitation. Nevertheless, conciliar debates preceding the definition indicated some of the limits on primatial authority: law (divine, natural and ecclesiastical), dogma, the personal capacity and historical situation of the pope. Theologians have pointed to others: collegiality, subsidiarity, sensus fidelium, and the new ecumenical climate (Granfield).

In fact, however, as important as these limitations are for theology, they exist only in theory, and except in the most extreme cases could never be enforced. The pope is held to be accountable to God and to God alone for his actions.

The Pope’s ardent desire for a Petrine office that fosters Christian unity cannot be at the expense of primatial power, as he himself says, “With the power and the authority, without which such an office would be illusory, the bishop of Rome must ensure the communion of all the churches” (no. 94).

Are there theological foundations upon which to erect structures that enable and require the exercise of primatial power in communion without diminishing the essential nature of the Petrine office?

THEOLOGY AND STRUCTURES FOR COMMUNION

Three traditional understandings of the Church and of faith go a long way toward creating the theological foundations needed to erect structures which ensure a primacy exercised in the communion. First, the Church is “one complex reality which comes together from a human and a divine element” (“Lumen gentium, n. 8 in Flannery: 357). Second, the risen Christ continues to guide and build up the Church through his Spirit.

Guiding the Church in the way of all truth (cf. Jn. 16:13) and unifying her in communion and in works of ministry, he [the Spirit of Christ] bestows upon her varied hierarchic and charismatic gifts, and in this way he directs her and adorns her with his fruit (cf. Eph. 4:11-12; I Cor. 12:4; Gal. 5:22) (“Lumen gentium, n. 4, in Flannery: 352).
Third, the principle of economy in matters of faith and practice, that is, “in order to restore communion and unity or preserve them, ‘one must impose no burden beyond what is indispensable” (Acts 15:28).  
(Unitatis redintegratio, n. 18 in Flannery: 467).

The Complex Reality of the Church

First, the Church is a complex reality in which a human element is united to a divine element.

For this reason the Church is compared, not without significance, to the mystery of the incarnate Word. 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 (cf. Eph. 4:15) (Lumen gentium, n. 8, in Flannery: 357).

Today the divine element is often separated from the human element, as in the expression, “it is not the church that has sinned, but some of its members.” Rather than a sacrament, a sign and instrument of salvation, the sign of the presence of the Spirit who accomplishes through it the work of salvation, at one and the same time a sign and cause of grace, the Church becomes an abstraction, a kind of tertium quid. Instead of a complex reality in which the social structure of the Church serves the Spirit of Christ as a living organ of salvation, the Church becomes an abstract reality interposed between Christ and his people, as if the Church was something other than the assembly of Christians united by baptism to Christ, their head. No one doubts the need to distinguish between the divine head of the Church and its human and sinning members, but the very mystery of the Church is the unity between Christ and the members of his body, a unity that makes of head and members, sign and instrument of salvation.

This abstract way of thinking and talking about the Church as if it were something other than this actual, historical, complex human and divine reality vivified by the Spirit of Christ is dangerous. There is a tendency to look for the faith of the Church elsewhere than in the human community of believers insofar as they are united to Christ their head. When leaders of the Church invoke the authority of the Church, the Church in whose name they act is often an abstract reality with little or no connection to a concrete people joined to Christ who manifests his authority only through them as the visible body of Christ. The Church as abstract reality is easily manipulated and can be made to say and do any number of things. The Church as abstract reality can also be the vehicle by which one escapes the concrete constraints of the
real, living Church, while still maintaining the illusion that one is in the Church not apart or above it.

All church leaders from pope to the most minor of ecclesial ministers must be really in the Church, the concrete historical people united to Christ in the Spirit. No one can speak or act in the person of Christ, who does not speak and act in the person of the Church.

*The Church is Ruled and Guided by its Risen Lord*

Sometimes the impression is given that the title “Vicar of Christ” designates the pope as the one who replaces Christ as head of the Church on earth, as if Christ were no longer present in his Church, and therefore, the pope is the steward who cares for the property of an absentee landlord.

Such ways of speaking can lead us to forget that the risen Lord is ever present in and to the community of his disciples. He guides the Church through the gift of his Spirit to all who believe in him. He is the only head of the Church. All other leadership is in relationship to Christ and subject to him and his Gospel. Jesus Christ is the absolute center of the community; it’s whole life revolves around him; Jesus alone gives meaning to everything in the community.

Sadly, a papal ideology created out of centralization of authority, sovereign primatial power, and infallibility tends to displace Christ from the center of the Church to its periphery. One forgets that the authority of the pope belongs not to him but to the Church and ultimately to Christ. The pope exercises the Church’s authority, given to it by Christ. One forgets that the pope is not the shepherd of God’s people but the servant of Christ who continues to shepherd his people and that all pastoral authority not only comes from Christ but must be exercised in constant dependence on him.

The Petrine ministry has authority only to the degree that it is transparent of Christ, a lens which is not itself the object of sight, but which enables a clear vision of Christ in all that is said and done. Only in real, actual, communion with the whole Church can the Petrine ministry be truly transparent of Christ and possess the authority it must have to discharge its mission. Effective ecclesial communion exists only when all share in common, not submission to Petrine ministry, but submission to Christ, whose servant Peter is.

Perhaps, too, now is the time to rid ourselves of the secular ideologies of monarchy, sovereign power, and symbols of imperial pomp: thrones and crowns, gold crosses and jeweled rings, coats of arms and flags, purple robes and scarlet silk, symbols and titles of royalty. Perhaps such things were once useful. Today they are the stuff of pious spectacles and entertainments, but hardly capable of bearing the message of the gospel.
Christ continues to rule and guide his Church through his Spirit which he gives to all who believe him. Because the Spirit dwells in each member, all members of the Church are fundamentally equal, having equal access to the Father. The Spirit endows each with charisms for the benefit of the whole Church. The indwelling Spirit constitutes both the freedom and the obligation to exercise the Spirit’s gifts for the benefit of the community. Therefore, fidelity to Jesus requires of the community and its leaders that they recognize the gifts of each member and facilitate their exercise.

Because in Christ all Christians are fundamentally equal and each is endowed with gifts of the Spirit given for the good of the whole Church, it is essential that the principle of representation be restored at all levels of church governance. This is not a question of democratization. This is not about voting. This is about respect for the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit granted to every believer. The Spirit is the very life of the community; its ultimate vitality depends on its continuing relationship with the Spirit. The dwelling place of the Spirit is not an abstract Church, but the concrete reality of the assembly of all believers, who individually and collectively have received the Spirit of Jesus and of Jesus’ God. Ultimately, the principle of representation is about accountability on the part of all church leaders to the Spirit dwelling in the Church. The Church has an obligation not to sin against the Holy Spirit.

Finally, because it is through the gift of his Spirit to each member of the Church that Christ leads and guides his Church, the ministry of leadership at all levels is in service to the leadership of Christ. At the heart of all leadership in the Church is the ministry of discerning what the Spirit is speaking in the community, where the Spirit is leading the community. There can be no “teaching Church” without there first being a “learning Church.”

Because through his Spirit given to all believers Christ continues to rule and guide his Church, synodal and conciliar structures are necessary at every level of the church’s governance. The Petrine ministry exists to facilitate and promote the development of these structures as real occasions for discernment, as opportunities for learning from the experience of the multiple and diverse communities that make the Church catholic. The leadership that characterizes a genuinely Petrine ministry is one grounded on persuasion not power. If we have learned nothing else in the last two millennia of Christian life, we should have learned that when the Church uses power it divides not unites. The axiom of Lord Acton, “All power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” has been verified abundantly in the life of the Church. Not only does power corrupt those who exercise it, but even more disastrously it corrupts those who are the objects of the exercise of power. The first and most tragic victim of power is the truth.
The Principle of Economy in Faith and Practice

In *Ut unum sint* Pope John Paul II lists the principal tasks incumbent on the pope as primate of the universal Church. These include (1) vigilance over the proclamation of the word, the celebration of the liturgy and the sacraments, the Christian life, mission, discipline in the Church, the requirements of the common good of the Church when threatened by personal self-interest; (2) the duty to admonish, caution, and at times declare an opinion irreconcilable with the unity of the faith; (3) the duty to speak in the name of all pastors when circumstances require it; and (4) the authority under strict conditions to declare that a doctrine is a matter of divine faith (no. 94).

To exercise the Petrine primacy in communion is to affirm the rightful autonomy that belongs to a particular church, whether led by patriarch, metropolitan, or bishop. There can be no communion without autonomy. Without autonomy there can only be the master-slave relationship. Autonomy is not independence, but the right of a particular church to realize its Christian life in terms of the genius of its own people, while maintaining communion with the other churches of Christ to ensure the evangelical authenticity of its own life. What is required, therefore, to protect the autonomy of particular churches is that principle of economy which echoes the judgment of the Council of Jerusalem, namely, “in order to restore communion and unity or preserve them, ‘one must impose no burden beyond what is indispensable’ *(Acts 15:28)*” (Unitatis redintegratio, n. 18 in Flannery: 467).

How would the principle of economy function in the present instance? First, the primatial office is essentially an episcopal and pastoral office, exercised in collaboration with the other members of the college of bishops. *(Ut unum sint* nos. 94–95). To watch over, to supervise the life of the churches is a responsibility that belongs to the whole college of bishops. The vigilance that the pope is expected to exercise over every aspect of Christian life in all the particular churches can only be exercised in collaboration with the leaders of these churches, that it is only in fraternal communion with these leaders that the pope can expect to acquire the knowledge and understanding required for vigilance that respects autonomy, and that it is only in communion that trust, (without which there can be no communion, no vigilance) is nourished among all the leaders of particular churches and between them and the pope. Structures for on-going consultation with the leaders of particular churches becomes an essential element in exercising appropriate vigilance.

Much the same can be said of the pope’s duty to speak for all pastors in circumstances which require it. His responsibility is to speak for, not instead of, all pastors. The Petrine office must have structures for ongo-
ing consultation to develop and maintain the communion needed to meet the obligation to speak for all pastors not simply in place of them.

Secondly, the primacy of the pope should be exercised in accord with the principle of subsidiarity. It provides that “any aspiration of an individual within the framework of the common good—whether for his or another’s benefit—should be accorded liberty, protection and, if need be, eventual support from society as a whole” (Utz: 181). This principle governs the actions of society in two ways: non-interference with the activities of individuals or lesser societies when these are capable of the tasks appropriate to them, and assistance to individuals and lesser societies when they are not able to perform appropriate tasks (Utz: 177).

Joseph Komonchak points to some elements which are commonly included in definitions of subsidiarity: social relationships and communities exist to provide help to individuals in their free but obligatory assumption of responsibility for their own self-realization; larger, “higher” communities exist to perform the same subsidiary roles toward smaller “lower” communities; communities must not just permit, but positively enable and encourage individuals to exercise their own self-responsibility and that larger communities do the same for smaller ones; communities must not deprive individuals and smaller communities of their right to exercise their self-responsibility; and because subsidiarity is grounded in the metaphysics of the person, it applies to the life of every society (Komonchak: 301–2).

Subsidiarity is not about a higher or larger community conceding to a smaller or lower community certain rights. It is not delegation. It is about assistance that a larger entity gives to a smaller for the sake of the self-realization of the smaller.

Finally, a third element to assure that in the name of restoring and maintaining unity no unnecessary burdens are imposed is the principle laid down by the Second Vatican Council in the “Decree on Ecumenism”:

> While preserving unity in essentials, let everyone in the Church, according to the office entrusted to him, preserve a proper freedom in the various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in the variety of liturgical rights, and even in the theological elaborations of revealed truth. In all things let charity prevail. If they are true to this course of action, they will be giving ever richer expression to the authentic catholicity and apostolicity of the Church (Unitatis redintegratio, no. 4 in Flannery, 458).

In 1988 Avery Dulles proposed ten theses to serve as criteria by which to assure unity in essentials and adequate freedom for diversity (Dulles: 32–47). While Dulles was concerned only with doctrine, the
principles expressed in these theses are specific applications of the
principle of economy to the whole range of Christian life, discipline,
worship and doctrine. In effect what these principles do is urge mini-
malism in what is defined as normative for Christian life, discipline,
worship and faith.

1. Authentic ecclesial communion requires a measure of agreement
on what constitutes Christian life, discipline, worship and doctrine.

2. Complete accord on every dimension of Christian life is neither
possible nor desirable, and therefore not necessary.

3. To determine where agreement is necessary, the hierarchy of im-
portance that exists in matters of Christian life, discipline, worship, and
doctrine must be the criterion.

4. The basic essentials of Christian life, discipline, worship, and doc-
trine are expressed in Scripture, the ancient creeds of the Church, the
trinitarian and christological decrees of the first five centuries, the an-
cient liturgies, the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, and the kinds
of worship and practice that flow from them, as well as the moral
teachings common to the churches in the first centuries. Agreement on
these basic essentials constitutes a considerable measure of ecclesial
communion.

5. The major Christian Churches already share a large measure of
agreement on these essentials.

6. Different churches can come into closer communion if they recog-
nize that matters of Christian life, discipline, worship and doctrine that
each church considers binding on its own members, even if not consid-
ered to be true by other churches, at least are recognized by other
churches as not manifestly repugnant to the revelation given in Christ.

7. In the interest of communion, churches should insist only on the
doctrinal, liturgical, and sacramental minimum required for a mature
and authentic Christian faith and life, and that all doctrines and prac-
tices formulated or established in response to past historical crises
should be carefully reviewed to see whether they must be imposed as
tests of orthodoxy and orthopraxis today.

8. By reinterpreting matters of Christian life, discipline, worship,
and doctrine, in a broader hermeneutical context, the limitations of
controverted doctrinal formulations and ecclesial practices can often be
overcome so that they gain wider acceptability.

9. In some cases substantive agreement can be reached without the
need to impose identical doctrinal formulations or liturgical practices.

10. Finally, for the sake of agreement on essential matters of Chris-
tian life, discipline, worship, and doctrine, what is binding in each tra-
dition must be carefully scrutinized and jointly affirmed with whatever
modifications, explanations, or reservations are required in order to ap-
pease the legitimate misgivings of the churches in communion.
The tendency of the modern papacy to multiply authoritative teachings and make every disciplinary and liturgical practice normative makes papal vigilance in these matters intrusive and burdensome. What is called for is a realistic hierarchy in matters of Christian life, discipline, worship, and doctrine.

CONCLUSION

In response to the invitation of John Paul II to open a dialogue about the papal office, considerable dissatisfaction has been expressed. Papal centralization, absolutism, micromanagement, the way bishops are appointed and the role of the curia are prominent issues. Fundamentally, there has been a failure to make effective the collegiality existing between the pope and the bishops. The Petrine primacy can be an effective instrument of unity only if it is exercised in the context of real communion. This requires the development of synodal and conciliar structures at every level of the Church, structures which threaten the primatial authority of the pope, as now conceived and practiced. What may help overcome the impasse is a search for ways to create a different theological context in which to understand the primatial power of the Petrine office. Among the many theological considerations that would help establish a new context, three seem to be useful: refocusing on the complex reality of the Church which unites the divine and the human; greater attention to the risen Lord as the one who rules and guides his Church through his Spirit poured out into the hearts of the faithful; and the principle of economy in matters of Christian life, discipline, worship, and doctrine. The dialogue has just begun. It will require much patience and charity. Only the Spirit will lead us to its conclusion in a deeper communion among all Christians.

REFERENCES


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