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Authority in an Ecclesiology of Communion

THE NATURE OF AUTHORITY

Authority can be described as the quality of leadership which elicits and justifies the willingness of others to be led by it. Authority differs from coercive power or domination in that it depends for its effectiveness on the fact that there are people willing to submit to it. Since the term "power" can stand for coercive force or domination, which can be effective even with regard to unwilling subjects, one does well to distinguish between authority and power. When I say authority elicits willingness to submit to it, I mean it "calls for," "is entitled to" such willingness; its "entitlement" will differ according to the nature and source of the authority in question. To say that authority "justifies" such willingness means that it makes submission to it at least reasonable. In some cases, what justifies willingness to submit to authority is the recognition that one has an obligation in conscience to do so.

Since this essay discusses authority in the context of ecclesiology, we are considering the kinds of authority to which one can expect members of the Church to be willing to submit. Kinds of authority in the Church will differ, depending on the specific quality of leadership that elicits and justifies the willingness of others to be led by it. One can speak, for instance, of the authority of holiness. In our own day we are witnesses of the extraordinary authority exercised by Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Founders of religious communities are also examples, but surely not the only ones, of people holding an authority that is based on a charismatic gift for leadership. Charisms, as Vatican II declares, are "special graces" which the Holy Spirit "distributes among the faithful of every rank, by which he makes them fit and ready to

undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and upbuilding of the church" (LG 12). A charism can endow a person with a quality of leadership that elicits and justifies the willingness of people to be led by it.

A charism can be described as a calling from God to some kind of service in the Church. In its *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has said: "Among the vocations awakened by the Spirit in the Church is that of the theologian" (n. 6). The role of the theologian also involves a specific kind of authority, which was described by the International Theological Commission in its *Theses on the Relationship between Ecclesiastical Magisterium and Theology* (Sullivan 178–216). Its statement is as follows:

Theologians derive their specifically theological authority from their qualifications as scholars. However, these cannot be separated from the distinctive character of their discipline, which, being "the science of the faith," cannot be pursued without a living experience and practice of the faith. For this reason the authority which theology enjoys in the Church is not that of a profane science, but it is a truly ecclesial authority, which has its place in the order of authorities that derive from the Word of God and are confirmed by canonical mission (Sullivan, 194).

AUTHORITIES THAT DERIVE FROM THE WORD OF GOD

Obviously, to speak of "authorities that derive from the Word of God" implies the more fundamental authority of the Word of God itself. However, for the purpose of this essay, we shall focus on the kinds of ecclesial authority that "derive from the Word of God." We have already mentioned that proper to theologians, whose authority, as the International Theological Commission has pointed out, is based on the scholarly competence with which they treat the Word of God. The authority of some theologians is also confirmed by a canonical mission to teach in a faculty of theology having a special relationship with the Holy See.

Another authority that derives from the Word of God is that of a universal consensus of the faithful in their belief. Vatican II spoke of this as follows:

The whole body of the faithful who have received an anointing which comes from the Holy One (see 1 Jn 2:20 and 27) cannot be mistaken in belief. It shows this characteristic through the entire people's supernatural sense of the faith, when "from the bishops to the last of the faithful" it manifests a universal consensus in matters of faith and morals (LG 12).

It is not a simple matter to establish the fact of such a universal consensus of the faithful in their belief. But when it is evidently present, it enjoys an authority which is sufficient to warrant the solemn dogmatic definition of the doctrine about which there is such a consensus. Examples of this are the definitions of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Among "authorities that derive from the Word of God," the one that plays the most prominent role in the Catholic Church, and yet seems the most difficult to reconcile with an ecclesiology of communion, is the authority that the pope and college of bishops have in the universal Church, and which each bishop has in his diocese. It is this "hierarchical" authority, and its role in an ecclesiology of communion, that will be the main focus of this essay. The first step will be to offer some considerations on the nature of hierarchical authority, its source in the Word of God, and its entitlement to the willingness of Catholics to submit to it.

HIERARCHICAL AUTHORITY

Hierarchical authority is composed of three essential elements: the christological, the pneumatological, and the ecclesiological. The christological element is its participation in the mandate which Christ gave to the apostles after his resurrection. This mandate, including the authority to "make disciples" and to "teach them to observe" all that Jesus had taught them (Matt 28:19-20), was shared collegially by the apostles, and was transmitted by them to their missionary coworkers and to the leaders of local churches. While some elements in the apostles' role were unique to them and could not be passed on, there is clear evidence in the New Testament that they made provision for the continuance of their pastoral ministry to the churches they founded, and did so by sharing with others the authority they had received from Christ. When the original apostles died, they left behind two groups of men with whom they had shared their pastoral mandate: their missionary coworkers, and the "presbyter/bishops" who presided collegially over the local churches. During the course of the century that followed the apostolic generation, these two groups coalesced, in a way that is still obscure, with the result that each Christian community came to recognize one of these persons as its bishop, and that these bishops were recognized by all but the Gnostics as the successors of the apostles in their mandate of pastoral leadership of the churches. It was the common Christian conviction that when a bishop died, and a man was chosen to succeed him, bishops of other churches had to come to ordain him, thus sharing with him the mandate that was originally given to the apostles by Christ. This is what is meant by

the christological element of hierarchical authority. In the case of the bishop of Rome, it is his role as successor to St. Peter in the special mandate which he received from Christ that provides the christological basis of papal authority.

The pneumatological basis of hierarchical authority is seen in the grace and assistance of the Holy Spirit which is invoked upon one being ordained to the episcopate. Vatican II made it clear that a person receives the threefold episcopal function by sacramental ordination, an essential element of which is the *epiclesis*, or invocation of the Holy Spirit, source of the grace that will equip the new bishop for his ministry (LG 21).

The ecclesiological element was more prominent in the early Church, when a bishop would be chosen by the clergy and faithful of the Church for which he was being ordained, and he would remain bishop of that same Church throughout his life. However, in modern times when bishops are appointed by Rome, and it is not uncommon that they are transferred from one see to another, there is still an ecclesiological element to their ministry, namely, its nature as *diakonia* or service, and its purpose, which is the “building up” of the Church, and the promotion of its common life of Christian faith and charity. *The “entitlement” of hierarchical authority to the willingness of the faithful to submit to it.*

The willingness of the Catholic faithful to be subject to the authority of the pope and their bishop is based on their Catholic faith, which, at least implicitly, acknowledges the christological, pneumatological, and ecclesiological basis of hierarchical authority. No doubt few would express their faith in these terms. But we can say that Catholics believe that the pope and bishops receive their authority ultimately from Christ, that their ordination has conferred on them a special grace of the Holy Spirit for their ministry, and that its purpose is to promote the good order and holiness of the Church.

People whose faith, at least implicitly, embraces these affirmations about the source and purpose of hierarchical authority, should recognize that it is not only reasonable to submit to such authority, but that they have an obligation to do so, when it makes legitimate demands on them. This last clause applies to every authority: there will always be limits to its legitimate exercise, depending on the nature and source of the authority. Hierarchical authority is limited to matters of “faith and morals,” that is, to what concerns Catholic belief and the practice of life in the Catholic Church. In the exercise of their authority, popes and bishops are subject to many instances of higher authority. The Theological Commission at Vatican II reminded Pope Paul VI of this, when he proposed saying that in the exercise of his authority, the

pope was "bound to the Lord alone" (*uni Domino devinctus*). The Commission rejected this emendation of the text, on the grounds that the pope was bound to respect revelation, the basic structure of the Church, the sacraments, the definitions of councils, and other such things (Ratzinger, 303). It is also evident that to be legitimate, any exercise of authority must meet the natural law's demand for justice and truth.

It is time now to come to the main question posed to us: what is the role of hierarchical authority in an ecclesiology of communion? First, we must ask what is meant by an "ecclesiology of communion."

ECCLESIOLOGY OF COMMUNION

Theology is "faith seeking understanding," and ecclesiology is the part of theology that seeks an understanding of that mystery of faith which is the Church. An ecclesiology of communion is one that seeks to understand the mystery of the Church primarily by asking how the notion of "communion" is realized in it, and what consequences follow if "communion" is recognized as the concept that best expresses the very nature of the Church.

We begin with the notion of "communion." The New Testament word *koinonia*, based on *koinon* meaning "common," expresses what is involved in "having something in common," that is, sharing or participation. Communion then is the bond of unity that is created among those who have something in common. We begin with the supreme exemplar: the communion among the Persons of the Trinity in the same divine nature. Since being in "the state of grace" can be described as a "sharing in the divine nature," this is both communion with God and communion among all those who share the supernatural life of grace. Given the modern Catholic understanding of the universality of the divine offer of grace, and the optimism expressed by Vatican II about the salvation of those who do not have Christian faith (LG 16), it follows that there is a communion with God and among all persons, whether Christian or not, who share the life of grace. This purely spiritual communion, which is knowable to God alone, differs from ecclesial communion in several important respects.

ECCLESIAL COMMUNION

Since the Church, as St. Thomas teaches, is constituted by faith and the sacraments of faith, ecclesial communion is founded on the sharing of Christian faith and participation in the Christian sacraments, through which people come to share in the life of grace. The sharing of Christian faith and sacraments necessarily takes place through partici-

pation in a Christian community and through its ministry. Hence ecclesial communion has not only the vertical dimension of union with God, but also the horizontal dimension of union with fellow Christians. One can also distinguish between the ontological and the sociological components of ecclesial communion. By its ontological components I mean the realities that people share through membership in the Church such as faith, sacraments, the gift of the Holy Spirit. By the sociological component I mean the communication that takes place among people who share these realities: their mutual recognition, acceptance, practice of charity, etc.

The sociological component of ecclesial communion in the Catholic Church includes mutual recognition and communication not only among the faithful, but also between the faithful and their pastors: the parish priest, the bishop, and the pope. As we have seen above, Catholic faith leads people to recognize and be willing to submit to the authority lawfully exercised by these pastors in their regard. This inserts a juridical aspect into the sociological component of ecclesial communion, because it involves the recognition of rights and duties between the faithful and their pastors. The faithful have a right to the ministry of their parish priest, and an obligation to accept legitimate decisions he makes for the good order of the parish; the pastor has a right to financial support from his parishioners, and an obligation to their spiritual welfare.

There is a particular kind of communion among the pastors themselves. Its ontological component is the sacrament of Holy Orders, which priests and bishops share in different degrees of fullness. Its sociological component of mutual acceptance and communication, besides the bond of priestly fraternity, includes the recognition of mutual rights and duties. Parish priests accept the authority of their diocesan bishop; bishops recognize one another as the legitimate pastors of their respective churches, and they all recognize the authority of the bishop of Rome and their rights and duties in his regard. This communion among all the Catholic pastors, ontologically based on the sacrament of the priesthood, but also juridical in nature, is what is meant by "hierarchical communion." A cognate term is "collegiality," which expresses the communion which binds all the Catholic bishops with one another in one united body or college, of which the bishop of Rome is the head. Collegiality among the bishops signifies and promotes the full communion by which the universal Catholic Church exists as a communion of particular churches.

It is time to suggest what consequences would follow for the exercise of hierarchical authority when "communion" is recognized as the concept that best expresses the nature of the Church.

HIERARCHICAL AUTHORITY IN AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF COMMUNION

Hierarchical authority is related to ecclesial communion as means to end: it exists in order to promote and maintain ecclesial communion. Authority is needed for the effective exercise of the three-fold office of teaching, sanctifying, and governing, whose purpose is the Church's communion in faith, worship, and charity. From the axiom that means must be proportionate to their end, it follows that the exercise of hierarchical authority must be governed by the requirements of ecclesial communion.

As we have seen above, the basic notion of *koinonia* is sharing or participation. Hence, the exercise of hierarchical authority will meet the requirements of an ecclesiology of communion to the extent that it promotes the participation in the life of the Church of all its members, according to the gifts and capacities of each. On the contrary, authority will fail to meet the requirements of an ecclesiology of communion when it so restricts active participation to the few, that the many are prevented from having that share in the life of the Church of which they are capable.

The Extraordinary Synod of 1985 recognized communion as a fundamental concept in the ecclesiology of Vatican II. One aspect of the Council's teaching that warrants this assessment is the insistence with which it called upon the pastors of the Church to recognize and foster the active participation of the laity in the life of the Church. It seems useful to recall some of the Council's teaching on this point:

The sacred pastors know well how much the laity contribute to the well-being of the whole church. For they know that they were not established by Christ to undertake by themselves the entire saving mission of the church to the world. They appreciate, rather, that it is their exalted task to shepherd the faithful and at the same time acknowledge their ministries and charisms so that all in their separate ways, but of one mind, may cooperate in the common task (LG 30).

Priests should be willing to listen to lay people, give brotherly consideration to their wishes, and recognize their experience and competence in the different fields of human activity. In this way they will be able to recognize along with them the signs of the times. While testing the spirits to discover if they be of God, they must discover with faith, recognize with joy, and foster diligently the many and varied charismatic gifts of the laity, whether these be of a humble or more exalted kind. . . . Priests should confidently entrust to the laity duties in the service of the church, giving them freedom and opportunity for activity and even inviting

them, when opportunity offers, to undertake projects on their own initiative (*PO* 9).

These conciliar texts provide one answer to the question how hierarchical authority should be exercised in conformity with an ecclesiology of communion, namely, by providing for the full participation of the laity in the life of the Church. The applications of this principle at the level of the parish are no doubt the most obvious ones, but there are important ways in which the laity can and should participate in the life of the Church at the level of the diocese, of the regional Church represented by the episcopal conference, and of the universal Church. Certainly, there are roles which lay men and women can appropriately fill at all of these levels, as collaborators in the many and varied works of the Church for which their charisms, natural talents, and expertise equip them. An ecclesiology of communion will require not only that lay persons be entrusted with the ecclesial roles for which they are qualified, but that they be treated by the clergy as full partners and not as "hired help."

TEACHING AUTHORITY IN AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF COMMUNION

Lumen gentium 25, which discusses the teaching authority of the bishops, says nothing about the participation of the laity in this fundamental aspect of the life of the Church. However, elsewhere the documents of Vatican II do attribute a significant role to the laity in the development of doctrine, its interpretation, and its presentation to the faithful and the world. I suggest that the following texts call for an exercise of hierarchical teaching authority that would be more fully consonant with an ecclesiology of communion than is suggested in the treatment of this question in *Lumen gentium* 25.

By its supernatural sense of the faith, the People of God unfailingly adheres to the faith, penetrates it more deeply through right judgment, and applies it more fully in daily life (*LG* 12).

The tradition that comes from the apostles makes progress in the church, with the help of the holy Spirit. There is growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on. This comes about through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts, and from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience (*DV* 8).

With the help of the holy Spirit, it is the task of the whole people of God, particularly of its pastors and theologians, to listen to and distinguish the many voices of our times and to interpret them in the light of God's word, in order that the revealed truth may be

more deeply penetrated, better understood, and more suitably presented (GS 44).

It is to be hoped that more of the laity will receive adequate theological formation and that some among them will dedicate themselves professionally to these studies and contribute to their advancement. But for the proper exercise of this role, the faithful, both clerical and lay, should be accorded a lawful freedom of inquiry, of thought, and of expression, tempered by humility and courage in whatever branch of study they have specialized (GS 62).

THE PRACTICE OF CONSULTATION AND DIALOGUE

Since being consulted and being listened to in genuine dialogue are the ways in which the greatest number of people can actually participate in the life of the Church, I shall conclude this essay with some observations on the practice of consultation and dialogue in the Catholic Church since Vatican II. My observations will necessarily be selective.

I shall begin with some examples of consultation and dialogue in the practice of the U.S. Bishops' Conference. The procedure which it followed in the preparation of its pastoral letters on peace, (NCCB, 1983), and on the economy, (NCCB, 1986), involved extensive consultation, both of experts in those matters, and of the ordinary faithful. The drafts that were prepared on the basis of this consultation were published with a view to their being discussed and criticized. In each case, after dialogue with critics of the first draft, the Conference published a second draft, again calling for discussion and critique. Only after further dialogue were the pastoral letters issued, in which care was taken to distinguish the various levels of authority that were being invoked in them, and the different kinds of response that were called for on the part of the Catholic faithful, according to the kinds of teaching being proposed.

Another example of consultation and dialogue is the U.S. Bishops' document: "Doctrinal Responsibilities: Approaches to Promoting Cooperation and Resolving Misunderstandings Between Bishops and Theologians" (NCCB, 1989). This document, drawn up with the collaboration of the Catholic Theological Society of America and the Canon Law Society of America, proposed guidelines for the procedure to be followed when a problem arose regarding what a theologian had taught or published. At that time, these guidelines were recommended, but not made obligatory. However, in its meeting in November 1996, the Conference approved norms for the implementation of the Apostolic Constitution *Ex corde ecclesiae*, which will make the procedures described in "Doctrinal Responsibilities" obligatory in the

United States, when the proposed norms are approved by Rome (NCCB, 1996).

Having seen some positive examples of consultation in procedures followed by the U.S. Bishops' Conference, we must now look realistically at some less encouraging cases.

CONSULTATION OF THE LAITY IN PASTORAL COUNCILS

Opportunities for the consultation of lay men and women on matters concerning the life of their parish and diocese are offered by their participation in pastoral councils. However, the 1983 Code of Canon Law prescribes that in each diocese a pastoral council is to be established "insofar as pastoral circumstances suggest" (Can. 511), and a pastoral council is to be established in each parish "if, after consulting the council of priests, the bishop considers it opportune" (Can. 536.1). In other words, the Code leaves to each bishop the decision whether to have a diocesan pastoral council and whether to require the establishment of pastoral councils in the parishes of his diocese. Of course, making the establishment of pastoral councils obligatory by law would not guarantee the seriousness with which the faithful would be consulted, but an obligation to establish them would have been a forceful reminder of the importance of regular consultation of the faithful.

THE CONSULTATION OF THEOLOGIANSON DOCTRINAL MATTERS

The first Synod of Bishops, on October 27, 1967, presented to Pope Paul VI a proposal to establish a commission of eminent theologians of various schools working in various parts of the world, "for the purpose of offering effective assistance to the Holy See, and in particular to the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, especially in doctrinal questions of greater moment" (Sullivan, 229). The motive for this proposal was the feeling among the bishops that there was need for the consultation of a wider spectrum of Catholic theological opinion on the part of the CDF, whose regular consultors were necessarily resident in Rome, and tended to represent a distinctively "Roman" point of view. After a delay of about a year and a half, Paul VI established the International Theological Commission in 1969. It has met about once a year since then, and has published a number of useful documents as the fruit of its discussions. However, there is reason to doubt whether the ITC has actually functioned as the Synod of 1967 intended it should. The question is whether this body of theologians has played any significant role in the preparation of important doctrinal statements that have been issued by the CDF in the years since the ITC was

established. I have in mind such documents as *Mysterium ecclesiae* of 1973, *Persona humana* of 1975, and *Inter insigniores* of 1977. I have been reliably informed, by one who was a member of the ITC during that period, that it was not consulted in the preparation of any of these documents.

THE CONSULTATION OF BISHOPS BY THE HOLY SEE

In the address which he gave at Oxford on June 29, 1996, to commemorate the centennial of Campion Hall, Archbishop John Quinn spoke from personal experience of what he saw as examples of the inadequate consultation of bishops on the part of the Holy See. With regard to the preparation of doctrinal declarations, he said:

Since it is the constant teaching of the church that bishops are judges and teachers of the faith, it would be more in keeping with this truth of faith if bishops were seriously consulted, not only individually but also in episcopal conferences, before doctrinal declarations are issued or binding decisions are made of a disciplinary or liturgical nature. In this way there would be a true, active collegiality and not merely a passive collegiality. . . . The bishops, if routinely and widely consulted on doctrinal and other important pronouncements, could be a better support to the pope, could help in bringing to bear the mind of the whole church on a given issue and in formulating a teaching so that the pope would not have to bear the burden all alone. The evident participation of bishops in these major decisions would also dispose larger numbers of people to accept them more readily (Quinn, 123).

Speaking from personal experience, Archbishop Quinn had this to say about the kind of consultation that takes place in the Synods of Bishops:

The international Synod of Bishops is another exercise of the collegial teaching office of bishops. But the synod has not met the original expectations of its establishment. . . . My point is simply to underline that issues of major concern in the church are not really open to a free and collegial evaluation and discussion by bishops, whose office includes being judges in matters of faith. A free discussion is one in which loyalty to the pope and the orthodoxy of those who discuss these issues are not called into question. In subtle ways and sometimes in very direct ways, the position of the Curia on these issues is communicated to bishops at synods and intimidates them. In addition, it is made clear that certain recommendations should not be made to the pope at the conclusion of a synod (Quinn, 123–24).

Finally, regarding the consultation of bishops in the naming of new bishops, Archbishop Quinn said:

It is not uncommon for bishops of a province to discover that no candidate they proposed has been accepted for approval. On the other hand, it may happen that candidates whom bishops do not approve at all may be appointed. There have been instances of priests of religious orders being named bishops without the knowledge of their own provincial superior and of diocesan priests appointed bishops when their own bishop was not consulted. Under the existing policy, collegiality in the appointment of bishops consists largely in offering bishops an opportunity to make suggestions. But the real decisions are made at other levels: the nuncio, the Congregation for Bishops, the Secretariat of State. . . . Honest fraternal dialogue compels me to raise the question whether the time has not come to make some modifications in this procedure so that the local churches really have a significant and truly substantive role in the appointment of bishops. In light of the decrees of the Vatican Council itself, the participation of the local churches in this process cannot properly be confined merely to the participation of bishops, but must include a meaningful and responsible role for priests, laypersons and religious (Quinn, 124).

Since an ecclesiology of communion calls for an exercise of authority that encourages and promotes the participation of all its members in the life of the Church, according to the gifts and calling that each has received, and since honest consultation and sincere dialogue are essential elements of such participation, I conclude that there is room for substantial improvement in the way that hierarchical authority is being exercised in the Catholic Church today.

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