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ARTICLE

Bishops, Not Altar Boys

What Would Real Collegiality Look Like?

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Hardly anyone had expected that Pope Benedict XVI would confront the scandal of clerical sexual abuse in the direct way he did during his recent U.S. visit, referring to it four times in five days. In another development that had not been anticipated, he met some of the victims, and won them over. Other victims, inevitably, were less sanguine. It was all "spin," they feared. Where was the substance to follow?

Some Vatican officials have tended to pin the blame for the scandal on English-speaking countries, but clerical power and secrecy, keys to the sexual-abuse phenomenon, are the same everywhere. After the pope ended his U.S. foray, Austrian media were asking why he had not been similarly frank in his visit there last year.

It will take decades for the church to recover. Whatever their prescription of cures for the disease, conservatives and progressives in the United States are agreed on one thing-the bishops failed. During his visit, Pope Benedict quoted the verdict of Chicago's Cardinal Francis George, with which he plainly agreed, that the crisis "was sometimes very badly handled."

The sexual-abuse scandal is one symptom of the problems afflicting the church. In the wake of the American disaster, lay protest groups such as Voice of the Faithful have argued for a new style of episcopal leadership. They want bishops who listen and are inclusive in their attitudes, not seeing themselves as a separate caste. They want more openness; they want a readiness to admit failures publicly; they want accountability.

Even such a loyal servant of the institutional church as Russell Shaw, in his new book, Nothing to Hide (Ignatius Press), has concluded that secrecy and clericalism are damaging the church's witness. For some twenty years from the late 1960s, Shaw was director of information for the U.S. episcopate, and then for the Knights of Columbus. A member of Opus Dei, he describes himself as "the ultimate company man." He now says: "We can solve the problem if we want to solve it." The answers are all there in the Second Vatican Council.

But more than forty years after the council, and after the long, monarchical papacy of John Paul II, is it too late? For younger Catholics, the council is history of which they have no personal experience. The story is told of the schoolteacher in the United States who asked a class what Vatican II was. Silence. Then one student ventured a guess: Might it be the pope's summer residence?

The chasm between the younger and older generations can be wide. Just before I retired from the editorship of the London Tablet at the end of 2003, I brought together representatives of both generations for a dinner and discussion. At one point a distinguished older participant criticized what he was hearing. When he was young, he said, his generation had been fired up by work for justice and peace. But now it appeared to him to be all "me, me, me." To which one of the younger participants retorted that this was the first time they had heard a desire for a close relationship with Jesus Christ described as egotism. Pope Benedict would certainly agree with that sentiment.

The new generation, it is often observed, does not put great faith in structures and institutions. They look elsewhere. Nevertheless, the eagerness by some commentators to downplay the lasting significance of Vatican II is premature. In a personal letter to the later-excommunicated Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre in 1975, Pope Paul VI said that Vatican II was as authoritative as the Council of Nicaea. When he was head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), the then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger put Vatican II on the same level as Vatican I or Trent.

Commenting in a May 3 Time magazine article ("Is Liberal Catholicism Dead?") that assessed the impact of Benedict's visit to the United States, former Commonweal editor Peter Steinfels said that the concerns of the older generation could not simply be dismissed by the younger. Steinfels saw "continuity in terms of the issues and the questions about whether church structures can be altered."

Writing in the New York Times at the end of the April papal visit, Steinfels distinguished between the God crisis and the church crisis, but refused to divide them. "If the church has become dysfunctional, inarticulate, or spiritless," he wrote, "it will be incapable of addressing those deeper questions with responses that satisfy both the mind and the heart." Structural change is the great unfinished business of Vatican II. In truth, the business has hardly begun (see "Reforming the Vatican," by Thomas J. Reese, Commonweal, April 25).

Vatican II approved major constitutional changes in church structures. It backed by huge majorities the doctrine of collegiality-that the church is governed by the college of bishops, with and under the pope. He and they exercise a shared responsibility. They are not his delegates. The governance of the Catholic Church today should reproduce the original pattern of the apostles grouped round their leader.

It had not been expected that the bishops could reach such unanimity. "We have won," Pope Paul VI told the moderators. The young journalist Michael Novak, then an enthusiast for reform, was rhapsodic on the evening of the day when the vote for collegial government was cast. "A nearly full moon," he wrote, "bathed St. Peter's Square in such brilliance, such serenity, as was worthy of the greatest day in Roman Catholic history since 1870" (the date of the First Vatican Council).

But powerful figures in the curia never accepted collegiality as valid. The story goes that the master general of the Dominicans, Michael Browne, consulted the Larousse dictionary, where he found the Collège de France defined as a college of equals. There could be no such college in the church, he said, because the pope and the bishops were not equals. He added that the only time the disciples acted as a collegial body was when Christ was betrayed and they all ran away.

Paul VI therefore faced opponents within his own household ready to get on with things as they were accustomed to do, when the bishops (questa gente da fuori-"these people from abroad") left Rome after the council. Paul VI's own high ideal of his office made it difficult for him to think collegially. Only weeks after his election, he had composed a private reflection that provides a dramatic insight into the inner consciousness of a man called to be the successor of St. Peter:

The post is unique. It brings great solitude. I was solitary before, but now my solitariness becomes complete and awesome. Hence the dizziness, the vertigo. Like a statue on a plinth-that is how I live now. Jesus was also alone on the Cross. We hear that he expressed his desolation by crying out, Eloi, Eloi. My solitude will grow. I need have no fears: I should not seek outside help to absolve me from duty; my duty is to plan, decide, assume every responsibility, and guide others, even when it seems illogical and perhaps absurd. And to suffer alone. The consolation of confiding in others will be rare and discreet: the depths of the spirit remain within me. Me and God. The colloquy with God must be full and endless.

Did one hear an echo in Benedict XVI's inaugural sermon? Benedict said: "I am not alone. All the saints of God are there to protect me, to sustain me, and to carry me." But what about his fellow bishops? He did not mention them.

What would collegiality mean in actual practice? When it came to the crunch, where should the emphasis fall as between the body of bishops as a whole and the pope among them as their head? Having overseen and guided the collegiality doctrine into the printed conciliar text, Paul VI would act in 1968 in a spectacularly noncollegial way.

The issue vexing for Paul VI in the immediate postconciliar years was contraception. His commission examining the question had concluded that the natural-law arguments against contraception were not persuasive. The pope was agonized. "How easy it is to study and study,"

he confided to an interviewer, “how hard to decide.” He decided alone. Forty years ago, his 1968 encyclical Humanae vitae, reaffirming the traditional ban against contraception, sparked a crisis in the church that continues beneath the surface to this day.

A direct challenge to Paul VI now came from one of the most influential members of the college of cardinals, the Belgian Léon-Joseph Suenens. It had been Paul VI’s particular fear that a change on contraception would damage church authority-exactly the result that in fact followed from his decision not to change. How much greater would the encyclical’s authority have been, Suenens argued, if it had been a collegial production. One wonders, if it had been, what would have happened to its contents and its subsequent reception.

Around the world, bishops’ conferences presented the encyclical to their people in a way that often emphasized the rights of conscience. Watching these developments from Poland was a recently appointed cardinal, Karol Wojtyla, still only forty-eight. He did not like what he saw. When he in turn was elected pope in 1978, he set about strengthening the rule of the church from Rome. He did it by redefining collegiality. He turned the meaning of the doctrine as widely perceived on its head.

In his very first encyclical, Redemptor hominis, John Paul made it clear that the emphasis was on him as the captain. It was the job of his episcopal team to follow his lead. They had to sing from the same hymn sheet, and to his tune. It would soon become clear that now when synods of bishops met in Rome, he was calling the church around him to help him with his government. When he went on one of his journeys, the local bishop risked being reduced to a master of ceremonies.

This was to be the main plank of what has been called John Paul’s “restoration.” The practice of collegiality was not corresponding to Vatican II’s expectations, the late Cardinal Basil Hume, archbishop of Westminster, told me when I went to interview him on the occasion of his seventieth birthday in 1993. But he did not say that on the record.

Those who welcomed the “restoration” argued that it was precisely John Paul’s immense authority as supreme leader of a community of more than a billion Catholics that enabled him to defy the Communist giant and play a major part in bringing it down. By the same token, they said, after the fall of the Communist empire it was again the pope’s dominance that enabled him to call the advanced capitalist democracies to account on essential questions of morality.

But when the center takes too much ground, the local churches suffer. The voices of local Catholic bishops are diminished. They are put in the shade by the man in white.

The changing attitudes of the U.S. episcopate are one indication. In the 1980s, the U.S. conference of bishops sought to exercise its teaching role by producing pastoral letters on nuclear deterrence and economic justice that were noticed widely and intensely discussed. Almost all the bishops’ deliberations were open. Only half a day perhaps out of a four-day meeting would be held in closed session (today the proportions are almost reversed). They also set themselves to tackle women’s issues, but ran into trouble on every side, with Rome constantly interrupting, suspicious of a bishops’ conference taking a leading role in such a sensitive area. Their projected pastoral letter to women went through a series of drafts, until in 1992 the bishops gave up and abandoned it.

There would be no more such pastoral letters. The U.S. bishops changed their tune as the composition of the conference was changed. Under Pope John Paul II, bishops of a different sort were being appointed. As Peter Steinfels writes in A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America, “Charismatic personality, administrative experience, and concern for the poor were all valued, but they could be trumped by one thing above all: readiness to follow Vatican orders. The result, by and large, has been paralysis.”

Occasionally local bishops let their feelings show. In October 1999, for example, startled journalists at a press conference in Rome, accustomed to banalities at such events, heard Archbishop (now Cardinal) Keith O’Brien of St. Andrews and Edinburgh reveal the inside story of

an abortive project that had been planned for the jubilee year 2000 by the national hierarchies of England and Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. The bishops had drawn up an ambitious plan to offer reconciliation as widely as possible on that occasion. There would be teaching on repentance and forgiveness throughout Lent. On the Saturday before Palm Sunday, general absolution would be available according to Rite Three-the one type of confessional practice that has proved deeply attractive to today's congregations in Britain and Ireland. Individual confessions would follow during the first part of Holy Week.

The bishops knew, of course, that general absolution was reserved for emergency situations. As pastors, they might justifiably have considered that their local situation fitted that bill very well, seeing how many Massgoers they had lost in the previous years, and how alarming were the projections of a continued downward trend. They had put out feelers in Rome, and had gained the impression that their initiative was a legitimate exercise of their pastoral responsibilities as bishops.

They were soon disillusioned. A peremptory letter from the then-prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, the Chilean Cardinal Medina Estévez, forbade them to go ahead.

"We know the theology all right," commented O'Brien at the press conference. "We are vicars of Christ in our diocese, that's the teaching of the Second Vatican Council." But, he went on, referring to the curia: "Some of the bishops who are in Rome don't think that."

Another cautionary tale comes from Austria. In Holy Week 1995, accusations of sexual abuse began to circulate about the cardinal archbishop of Vienna, Hans Hermann Groer. Three years later, in 1998, monks at the abbey of Göttweig accused Groer of abusing them in the confessional. As the crisis deepened, an impulse of reform burst out. It was led by a layman, Thomas Plankensteiner. The reformers pointed to their right under the Code of Canon Law to make their needs known to their pastors. The movement grew stronger by the month, and the majority of the Austrian bishops accepted that they had to engage with it. Thus the "Dialogue for Austria" was launched, which came to its climax at Salzburg in October 1998, when for three days three hundred delegates, chosen to represent a broad spectrum of Austrian Catholics, debated, argued, worshiped, and prayed. Clear majorities backed the reform proposals put forth by the conference, especially the ordination of mature married men as priests and of women as deacons. A massive majority of 89 percent wanted the local church to have more say in the appointment of bishops, while 75 percent thought that matters of birth control should be a decision of personal conscience. The fruits of the dialogue's Salzburg summit seemed to please Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, Groer's successor as archbishop of Vienna. "We have received an invaluable measure of trust, a capital asset we must not gamble away," said Schönborn.

In reality it may have been the reform movement's most outspoken opponent, Bishop Kurt Krenn of St. Pölten, who voiced the deepest opinion of the hierarchy. The very word dialogue "stank," said Krenn. The wave of energy generated in this local church was left to sink into the sand.

Krenn's words on this occasion chime with the rejection of the efforts of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago by some of his peers in the United States when he launched the Common Ground Initiative, a proposal to bring progressives and conservatives together in dialogue. What need was there for dialogue? asked Bernardin's opponents, most prominent among them Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston. They knew what the truth was.

As John Paul's papacy continued, the synod of bishops increasingly became little more than a rubber stamp. The warning signs were there from the start, however. Pope Paul VI established the synods by a motu proprio, on his own authority, instead of as an act of the council, and he defined their function as merely consultative. One of the regional synods called by John Paul II in preparation for the millennium brought together bishops from Asia. Never was the potential of the synodal assembly more clearly shown. Here were bishops determined to impress on Rome that they were not coming as "local secretaries awaiting instructions from headquarters," as Bishop Francis Hadisumarta, president of the Indonesian bishops' conference, put it. Similarly,

the Japanese bishops were so dissatisfied with the Western context of the preparatory questions circulated beforehand by Rome for discussion that they rejected them, substituted another set drawn from their own situation, and provided answers to those. The curial-based secretary general of the synod, the late Cardinal Jan Schotte, was furious. He was convinced that a foreign Jesuit or Dominican was responsible for the insubordination. No, said the Japanese, it was us. “That’s even worse,” retorted the highly efficient, controlling Belgian. Was it in retaliation that Japanese was not included among the many Asian languages used at the synod’s opening Mass in St. Peter’s?

In his opening speech, Hadisumarta called for the decentralization of church decision making. Vatican II envisioned “a communion of churches,” he pointed out-the opposite of “a monolithic pyramid.” Local churches should have authority to select and appoint bishops and train their own clergy. For thirty years, Hadisumarta revealed, the Indonesian bishops’ conference had “regularly” requested permission from Rome to ordain mature married men as priests-always in vain. It is suggestive, however, that Rome never gave a straight negative answer, but said, rather, that such a change would be “inopportune.”

The expression on Cardinal Schotte’s face during Hadisumarta’s speech spoke volumes. “If looks could kill,” one commentator observed, “Hadisumarta would have died instantly.” Hadisumarta’s was no isolated voice. Other bishops expressed the same concern that they were not even trusted to produce their own vernacular translations of the Mass, but instead had to send these to Rome for authorization-where, one bishop told me in an interview, since their languages were not spoken, it was most likely to be one of their own seminarians who checked the texts that the bishops had approved.

Ecumenism is another casualty of a noncollegial church. John Paul II’s monarchical style made it impossible for him to break through in the difficult dialogue between Eastern and Western Christians. The Eastern Orthodox will not move toward a Catholic Church that is not collegially governed. Their whole psychology tends toward decentralization, and they fear the imperialism, as they see it, of Rome. With what pattern of headship in mind, the Orthodox wondered, was a Polish pope making overtures to them? John Paul’s consistently repeated wish to meet Patriarch Alexis in Moscow was never granted.

Among Protestants, ecumenism is becalmed. If members of what Rome now insists on calling “ecclesial communities” do not see collegiality being practiced in the Catholic Church, they will share with it in prayer and worship and in practical and spiritual initiatives, but will go no further. Any church contemplating union has to be able to see key elements of itself in its prospective partner.

The establishment of the sort of collegiality endorsed by the bishops at the Second Vatican Council would stabilize what some think of as the “double heartbeat” of the Catholic Church, namely the essential rhythm between the local and the universal church. Collegiality would put wind back into the ecumenical sails. It would set the pattern not only for pope and bishops, but for bishops and priests, and for priests and people. The disempowerment of the bishops over the last thirty years needs serious correction. I recall going to see Cardinal Bernardin during one of his visits to Rome. “You know,” he said to me, “they treat us like altar boys here.”

A reforming pope would build up the synod of bishops. He could call a commission of senior metropolitans to make proposals for improvements in methods and structure. The aim would be to demonstrate in practice that supreme executive authority belongs to the pope and the episcopal college, not to the pope and curia. There could be arrangements for permanent representation of the bishops’ conferences in Rome. Such moves would be sure to receive the massive assent of the whole diocesan episcopal body.

Such a pope would surely also attend to the method of appointing bishops. The present rules are enshrined in canon law and could not be changed without papal authorization. But they are comparatively recent. During the first millennium, the right of the clergy and people of local churches to elect their own leaders had apostolic authority and was strongly backed by Rome.

Since the 1917 Code of Canon Law, however, it is the pope who appoints almost all the bishops of the world. There are requirements for consultation by nuncios, and there have been outstanding choices. Inevitably, however, the present system favors the emergence of “safe” men.

Suggestions for improvement include a set of carefully considered proposals offered by Archbishop John Quinn of San Francisco. He was responding to Pope John Paul II’s own appeal in the 1995 ecumenical encyclical Ut unum sint for help in finding ways to exercise the papal primacy in such a way as to reveal it to all as a service of love, not of domination. Criticizing the understanding of the church that underlies the present arrangements, Quinn pointed to a lack of Vatican II collegiality. He advocated much greater say for the laity, the local bishops, and the national bishops’ conferences.

A future reforming pope could also return to Vatican II’s conviction that bishops’ conferences are a valid intermediate form of collegiality. In 1998 the authority of the conferences everywhere was sharply reduced when Pope John Paul ruled that they could not issue statements on doctrinal or moral matters unless these were voted through unanimously or had approval from Rome-a requirement that was never made in the first millennium of the church’s history, when provincial synods and councils were common, and a clear majority was accepted as decisive even regarding the most fundamental theological questions.

But no one thinks about Vatican II nowadays,” people repeat. “Young Catholics don’t know what it said, and they don’t care.”

Cynics should recall that the groundbreaking work of Vatican II was accomplished by bishops. The council documents belonged to them all, unlike those of Vatican I, which belonged to the pope. There is no better description of what the bishops accomplished than was penned at the time by one of the council’s theological experts. Looking back on that four-year event of high drama, intellectual and spiritual struggle, debate and argument that had just concluded, he was moved to write:

The bishops were no longer the same men they had been before the council.... In the common struggle for truth, statements were boldly made which five years ago would have been virtually unthinkable.... This spiritual awakening, which the bishops accomplished in full view of the church, or, rather, accomplished as the church, was the great and irrevocable event of the council. It was more important in many respects than the texts it passed, for these texts could only voice a part of the new life which had been awakened in this encounter of the church with its inner self.

That was the testimony of Fr. Joseph Ratzinger, then theological adviser to Cardinal Joseph Frings, later cardinal prefect of the CDF, now Pope Benedict XVI. He has since come to a view that puts the texts, rather than any “spirit of the council,” first. But those texts themselves enshrine the doctrine concerning collegiality. Here indeed is unfinished business. Benedict himself will not likely institute structural reforms. Will there ever be a reforming pope who will?