



FAITH & REASON

THE JOURNAL OF CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

Spring 1988 | Vol. XIV, No. 1

EDITORIAL: STRUCTURED DIALOGUE IN THE CITY OF THE ANGELS (PART I)

Timothy T. O'Donnell, STD



DURING POPE JOHN PAUL'S RECENT VISIT TO THE UNITED STATES, ONE OF THE "highlights" was his meeting in Los Angeles with the American bishops. On the morning of September 16, the Pope celebrated Morning Prayer with the bishops in the chapel of Our Lady Queen of the Angels Minor Seminary at Mission San Fernando.

Significantly, it was the feast of Sts. Cornelius and Cyprian. The Pope took for his reflection a passage from the first Epistle of St. Peter: "God's flock is in your midst; give it a shepherd's care. *Watch over it willingly as God would have you do.*" (1Pt. 4:2)

The Holy Father, true to his apostolic task of strengthening his brother bishops (Lk. 22:32), urged them not to have a spirit of timidity because love is stronger than fear. He stated that the primary task of bishops in the Church today is to center their attention upon Jesus Christ. In so doing they become witnesses to his Cross and Resurrection and therefore "a living sign of Jesus Christ."

The Pope then explained what it means to be a "living sign" of our Lord. First of all, the bishop must be a man of prayer; as Christ who took the time during his public ministry to be alone with his heavenly Father. Second, the bishop must be a man of compassion; who like Christ healed the sick and comforted the brokenhearted. Third, he must radiate to all the love of Christ who is "more powerful than sin and death." Last of all, he must be a man of fidelity. Fidelity above all to Christ which inevitably will make him like Our Lord: a sign of *contradiction*.

This talk set the stage for the fascinating event which followed: the Vicar of Christ dialoguing with the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. The meeting opened with a welcoming address by Archbishop John May of St. Louis, the President of the Conference. During this meeting, four archbishops selected by the NCCB addressed the Holy Father in the name of all the bishops. Interestingly, the four selected were Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the Archbishop of Chicago, Archbishop John Quinn of San Francisco, Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee and Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk of Cincinnati. Each archbishop was to address a particular area of concern with the Pope giving a personal response to each individual talk immediately upon its completion. Such is the power and glory of "structured dialogue."

What followed was a very revealing exchange which manifested some of the deeper tensions which exist between the Holy See and the Catholic Church in America. This makes the exchange worthy of serious reflection and examination.

Due to the abundance of material and its importance for revealing the mind of the Holy Father as well as the thinking of the American hierarchy, we shall limit our discussion in this issue to the first presentation and the papal response.

Cardinal Bernardin was the first to initiate the dialogue. His subject was the relationship between the universal and the particular Churches with a special emphasis upon the American situation. The Cardinal began by stating

that the Holy Father's presence among his brother bishops highlighted the Church as *communio*. Speaking for all his fellow bishops, Bernardin sought to "assure" the Pontiff that the Church in the United States would always be "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic." The living out of the mystery of the Church however must take place "in the context of our American culture." The Cardinal then gave his assessment of American culture which he characterized as an open *society* which:

- places a primacy upon freedom of speech;
- questions matters of great importance such as religion;
- needs to know the reasons for decisions;
- feels free to criticize those decisions if they don't agree;
- sees the freedom to criticize as essential to their life as "responsible, educated adults;"
- due to two centuries of freedom, Americans instinctively react negatively when they are told they must do something.

The result of these factors, according to Bernardin, is that there is an "impression" given that there is "a certain rebelliousness" on the part of many Catholics. He admits that these cultural realities can create problems within the ecclesial community. The Cardinal reassured the Pope however that the majority of Catholics in this country "accept the Church as described in conciliar documents."

As in any living entity which values unity and diversity, Bernardin stated that there will occasionally be misunderstandings and tensions. These, he observed, need not always be "negative factors" which hurt the community. Often times these tensions can be a "sign of growth." He then raised the question which was central to his reflection: How is it possible to maintain our unity while at the same time allowing a legitimate diversity in the local "realizations" of the Church?

He then singled out two particular tendencies which have a detrimental effect upon the relationship be-

tween the universal Church and the particular Churches in this country. The first tendency is one which reacts negatively to the Holy See's reaffirmation of traditional Catholic doctrine as "turning back the clock" which makes "new and unreasonable demands on people." The second tendency which he develops more thoroughly is when someone (i.e., a bishop or theologian?) questions how best to articulate a truth or how one might live a truth in contemporary society, they are often accused of denying the truth itself. At times, the impression is given that these individuals are in conflict with the magisterium. The Cardinal laments this situation which renders "true dialogue" impossible since both parties are cast in adversarial roles.

Bernardin then stated that he knows this problem is a "great concern" to the Pope. After praising John Paul's effectiveness in the exercise of his Petrine Office, he informed him that at times he is "misunderstood"; that some state that he has "failed to understand" the complexities of the existential situation in which the various local Churches find themselves:

The Cardinal spoke of the personal suffering of the American bishops when they find themselves "cast in an adversarial position with the Holy See" or at times with those within their own diocese. Often this is done by people "who do not understand" the American bishops or by extremists who reject the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.

After presenting a selection of the "unique aspects" of the Catholic Church in America and some of the tensions, the Cardinal then proposed a number of solutions which should decrease these tensions and allow for a more constructive exchange between the "universal Church"

and the "particular Churches."

Bernardin stated his belief that the Church in the United States can contribute a great deal to the universal Church as evidenced by the American contribution to the conciliar documents on religious freedom and ecumenism. At the same time, he acknowledged that the



Cardinal Bernardin and JPII

Church in America has a great deal to learn from the universal Church although what this might be remains unspecified.

The first thing that can be done, according to Bernardin, is to establish throughout the entire Church a greater trust in the presence of Christ in his Church and in the continuing action of the Holy Spirit. Secondly, those engaging in dialogue must be able to address one another “in complete candor” and “without fear.” Lest this be misunderstood, Bernardin stated that this candor must apply to the exchanges between the American bishops and the Holy See as well as exchanges between brother bishops. Even if the exchange would appear confrontational, all parties “must remain calm” in order that differences will not be “manipulated” by others. The third point relates to the nature of this dialogue. The exchange must be conducted with “objectivity, honesty and openness” so that a true discernment may take place as to what strengthens and weakens unity. Even if such discernment is not immediately possible, this should not be a source of discouragement because “we must allow for growth and development in certain areas of the Church’s life and ministry.” The fourth point is that the Pope and bishops “must affirm and continue to grow” in a mutual understanding of the Second Vatican Council’s “vision of collegiality.” Bernardin here praised the National Council of Catholic Bishops as a “visible expression” of that collegiality sought for by the Council.

Among the achievements of the NCCB, he lists that it has:

- enhanced the pastoral role of each bishop;
- provided a forum and framework to share ideas;
- taught and elucidated sound Catholic doctrine;
- set pastoral directions;
- developed policy positions on contemporary social issues.

The Cardinal’s final point was to reaffirm the Church in America’s attachment to the See of Rome. He did this by patching together a quote of Karl Rahner’s taken from a chapter in his book *The Shape of the Church to Come*. A book which is rather critical of the Papal “institution,” to say the least.

What was the Papal response to this presentation? With great acumen the Pope gently yet firmly by-

passed many of the secondary issues which had been raised and concentrated upon the central issue: a proper understanding of what is meant by *communio*.

After quoting from the Extraordinary Session of the Synod of Bishops in 1985, John Paul stated that the concept of *communio* lies at the very center of the conciliar ecclesiology. Because of this, the Pope encourages us to repeatedly return to the documents themselves since it is there that we can be filled with “the profound theological vision of the Church which the Holy Spirit has placed before us.” It is this theological (not sociological) vision which is to form “the basis of all pastoral ministry” which goes on in the Church.



The true renewal of the Church envisioned by the Council is not to be sought primarily in any “external structures which have developed (i.e., the NCCB?) but “in deeper understanding and more effective implementation of the core vision of her true nature and mission.” According to the Pope, the success of the Church’s efforts at renewal depends upon the extent to which the teachings of the Council are “authentically received” by each particular Church as well as the universal Church.

The Holy Father next offered for the sake of clarity a definition of the term *communio* as “primarily, a sharing through grace in the life of the Father given us through Christ and in the Holy Spirit.” He then made the following observations concerning this communion: 1) it has its origin in a divine call; 2) this call is an eternal decree in which we were predestined to share the image of the Son (Rom. 8:28-30); 3) it is realized in a sacramental union with Christ; 4) this sacramental union occurs through an organic participation in the totality of the divine and human reality of the Church, the Mystical Body.

The Pope set forth here with great clarity what he calls “the vertical dimension” of ecclesial communion. Since the Second Vatican Council, this “vertical dimension” has been obscured and many have grasped only the “horizontal dimension.” This is a very serious distortion of the conciliar teaching and one that must be corrected. John Paul stated that unless the entire Church has a keen awareness of the marvelous and utterly gratuitous out-

pouring of “the kindness and love of God our Savior” (i.e., the vertical dimension) ... the whole ordering of the Church’s life and the exercise of her mission of service to the human family will be radically weakened and never reach the level intended by the Council.

It would seem that the Pope is here arguing for the primacy of a theological vision (vertical) of the Church over a sociological vision (horizontal) which cannot grasp the supernatural character of the Mystical Body. A true understanding of the Church as *communio* must be grounded in Christ, His divine will and the supernatural life of grace which he offers to man. If this vision is lost, the Church becomes, in the words of the Pope, “radically weakened.”

The ultimate measure of the vitality of the Church is the extent to which the grace of Christ given to us through the Holy Spirit “is accepted by the members.” This is the ultimate criteria by which the bishops are to judge whether or not the discharge of their pastoral office is effective. The Holy Father asked the bishops if the entire People of God are being “led to Christ” and growing “in faith, hope and charity” and therefore being transformed into “authentic witnesses of God’s love in a world in need of transfiguration.”

This vertical dimension of *communio* must be taken into account if one is to grasp the relationship of the local Churches to the universal Church. The Holy Father next quoted from the Council itself:

In and from such individual Churches there comes into being the one and only Catholic Church. (*Lumen Gentium* 23)

The Pope, in commenting upon this conciliar text, stated emphatically that it cannot be understood as stating that the universal Church can be considered a “sum of the particular Churches or as a federation of Churches.”

In order to deepen our sense of *communio*, the Pope turned the attention of the bishops to the Eucharist: a point so central to communion, yet oddly enough was not mentioned by Cardinal Bernardin. This is a telling example of the importance of deepening the theological vision and the need to avoid what the Pope referred to as “a merely sociological view.”

The Pontiff follows his own advice and returns

again to the conciliar documents which communicate that “profound theological vision of the Church” which was inspired by the Holy Spirit:

“The principal manifestation of the Church consists in the full, active participation of all God’s holy people in the same liturgical celebrations, especially in the same Eucharist, in one prayer, at one altar, at which the bishop presides, surrounded by his presbyterate and by his ministers” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 41). Wherever a community gathers around the altar under the ministry of a bishop, there Christ is present and there, because of Christ, the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church gathers together (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 26).

This teaching of the Council concerning the Eucharist and the communion of the Church set the stage for what I would call a “Petrine invasion” of the local Church. Such a term is misleading in the sense that it refers more to the realization or a reawakening to a truth which has become somnolent in the Church in America. The Pope recalled the truth that “*the Catholic Church herself subsists in each particular Church*” thereby necessitating a full communion with the entire Mystical Body of Christ.

The Pontiff then recalled a message which he sent last November to the gathering of the bishops in Washington:

The very *mystery of the Church* impels us to recognize that the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church is present in each particular Church throughout the world. And since the Successor of Peter has been constituted for the whole Church as Pastor and as Vicar of Christ (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 22), all the particular Churches—precisely because they are Catholic, precisely because they embody in themselves the mystery of the universal Church—are called to live in communion with him.

What the Pope is drawing attention to here is that in order to have *communio collegialitas effectiva et affectiva*—the particular Church must always be in full communion with the Bishop of Rome. They, like Peter, are “vicars” and have an obligation to see to it that differences between their local Church and the universal Church are not destructive of unity.

The full significance of this statement, this “Petrine invasion” is then set forth by the Pope:

In this perspective too, we must see the ministry of the Successor of Peter, not only as a “global” service, reaching each particular Church from “outside” as it were, but *as belonging already to the essence of each particular Church from “within.”*

The local bishop must therefore be of one mind and heart with the Holy Father. This, according to Pope John Paul, is an essential element in the ecclesial structure contained in the term *communio* as used by the Second Vatican Council.

Implicit in the papal address to Cardinal Bernardin is the truth that the Bishop of Rome’s ministry is a universal ministry and is superior to the ministry of the

local ordinary. There is not a basic equality of ministry or enrichment. The Papal mind and will is to be accepted and manifested in each particular Church by the local bishop. The local bishop must acknowledge the presence of Peter “within” the particular Church as the guarantee of an authentic *communio*. Magari! Such a recognition on the part of the American bishops would go a long way in resolving many of the “tensions” spoken of by the Archbishop of Chicago. (TO BE CONTINUED)

Timothy T. O’Donnell, STD

February 22, 1988
Feast of the Chair of St. Peter

