

“Bishop as Source or Center”

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One of the positive contributions of Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord is its call for greater integration of lay ecclesial ministry into the total ministerial life of the church. Key to this integration, according to the document, is the role of the bishop.

Co-Workers continues a trajectory in recent years toward greater episcopal oversight of lay ministry. What began as a basically parish phenomenon—professional lay ministry—has seen greater and greater diocesan support and coordination. Co-Workers seeks to further these developments. The document is addressed primarily to bishops and to those who assist the bishop in the formation of lay ecclesial ministers. And it explicitly states: “By reason of his ministry it is the role of the bishop, often through the pastor, to give oversight (episcopate) to order these new ministerial relationships within his diocese and to affirm and guide the use of those gifts that lay ecclesial ministers bring—not to extinguish the Spirit, but to test everything and to retain what is good.”¹ Not seeking to overturn radically the way things run, Co-Workers nonetheless encourages bishops to get more involved.

In my remarks, I want to argue that this increased attention to the role of the bishop is helpful if it is animated by a theological vision that sees the bishop as the center of the ministerial life of the diocese. It is problematic if it rests on a vision of the bishop as the source creating and controlling lay ecclesial ministry.

Or, I want not so much to argue this claim as to assert it—and instead spend a little time reflecting on these two theological visions: the bishop as source and the bishop as center. This reflection is needed because these two visions are out there, directing the ways in which different bishops and different dioceses are responding to Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord.

Bishop as Source

First, the bishop as source. This view of the bishop as source of ministry for the diocese is deeply ingrained in our tradition. It still has a strong hold in official church teaching and in the self-understanding of many bishops.

This image of the bishop as source is rarely taken in an exclusive or ultimate sense. That is, everybody admits there are many ministers in the church. And everybody recognizes that Christ is the ultimate source of all ministry. But there is still a tendency to imagine the bishop as the conduit or the font through which or out of which the ministry of Christ comes to others. This vision of the bishop as source is supported by both a historical narrative and a philosophical principle. The historical narrative is that of apostolic succession. The philosophical principle is that of the bishop's "fullness" of ordained ministry. I'll say something on each.

The traditional historical narrative—namely, that in choosing the Twelve, Christ bestowed on these Apostles the power and authority to lead the church, authority that they in turn

passed on to their successors, who, in turn passed it on to their successors, in an unbroken chain down to the present—remains a key component of theological identity for many bishops.

This fact should not surprise us. The narrative provides the foundation for the doctrine of apostolic succession. It is supported by a christocentric theology of orders that has directed reflection on ministry for centuries. The narrative is unambiguously affirmed in chapter three of Lumen Gentium. It is continued in the preoccupation with ministerial power found in the revised Code of Canon Law, in the definition of Holy Orders offered in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and in the reflections of John Paul II in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation Pastores Gregis.²

Within such a narrative, the bishop serves as source in the sense of conduit, passing on the ministry of Christ to others.

In thinking about lay ministry in the church, we might ask: Haven't we already moved beyond this "channel theory" of ministry? In the first half of the twentieth century, various lay associations and movements were grouped under the umbrella of Catholic Action and enthusiastically promoted by various popes. At the time, Catholic Action was broadly understood as the way in which the laity helped the clergy do their job. Or, as Pope Pius XI defined it, Catholic Action was "the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the Church's hierarchy."³ Within this earlier view, the apostolate flowed down through the bishops and the other clergy to the laity.

The Second Vatican Council deliberately set aside this view of things. The laity's call to the apostolate comes not from the hierarchy or through the hierarchy but directly from Christ himself. Its basis is baptism.⁴ If the hierarchy maintains a role in the apostolate of the laity (and they do), this role cannot be that of its source.

One difficulty in coming to terms with lay ecclesial ministry today is that it involves not just the apostolate, but the apostolic ministry. By their particular roles and responsibilities, lay ecclesial ministers seem to be drawn into the orbit of pastoral care, the realm of pastoral ministry. And there is an assumption in recent magisterial statements that pastoral ministry belongs to the pastors, that the apostolic ministry belongs to the successors of the Apostles.

Recall that when the U.S. bishops gathered in November 2005 to vote on the final version of Co-Workers, debate arose over whether the term “ministry” was even appropriate for laypersons working on behalf of the church. The Catholic press noticed this debate with some surprise; but it wasn’t the first time it came up.⁵ Throughout the process of drafting Co-Workers, a few bishops made this point again and again: We’re not just talking about the apostolate, we’re talking about the apostolic ministry. If by “ministry” one means “pastoral ministry” or “apostolic ministry”—often conflated and combined as the prerogative of the ordained—then the question of the appropriateness of the term becomes inevitable. Can the bishop share this ministry with those who are not ordained? The question itself is a symptom of imagining the bishop as a conduit through which the ministry bestowed by Christ on the Apostles comes to others.

In addition to this historical narrative, there is also a philosophical principle. If the historical narrative of apostolic succession suggests the image of the bishop as source in the sense of conduit, the philosophical principle of the bishop’s “fullness” suggests the image of the bishop as font out of which ministry flows. Here it is not so much history as it is hierarchy—specifically Neo-Platonic descending hierarchy—that offers an image of bishop as source.

In chapter 3 of Lumen Gentium, after the historical narrative of apostolic succession presented in articles 18-20, comes a focused theological exposition in article 21. There the council teaches that episcopal consecration confers “the fullness of the sacrament of Orders.”

The council does not specify exactly what this “fullness” consists in, and theologians since have debated various possibilities. But the language itself—fullness, plenitude—has roots in our earliest tradition and takes shape in the medieval application of Pseudo-Dionysian hierarchies to church office.

Dionysius was the pseudonymous sixth-century author of several important mystical texts. Because medieval theologians conflated this author with the convert of St. Paul named in Acts 17 and with St. Denis, the first bishop of Paris, his writings held enormous authority throughout the Middle Ages. Pseudo-Dionysius was deeply influenced by Neo-Platonism. Thus his view of hierarchy was one in which plurality emanates forth from a higher unity. Lower realities (whether they be angels, animals, or human occupations) flow out of and thus participate in higher realities. The higher serves as source of the lower.

Applied to church office, ministry flows downward, higher offices create and control lower ones. According to the logic of hierarchy, lower realities are already and in some way present in the higher realities. Thus, there is no ministry open to a layperson which a monk or a religious sister, a priest or the pastor could not do in a fuller, more perfect way.⁶

Granted, that is a lot to read into article 21 of Lumen Gentium. In fact, at other points in the council debates, the bishops intentionally distanced themselves from such a descending view. But we should not ignore the lingering influence of this Neo-Platonic notion of participation.

The 1997 Vatican Instruction, Ecclesiae de Mysterio, tellingly-titled “On Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Nonordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests,” risks such a view.⁷ While at points the document helpfully distinguishes different ministerial tasks, its vision of the priest’s sacred ministry is so all-encompassing that it hard to

imagine any lay activity within the church as anything but a participation in something that properly belongs to the ordained.

Even more problematic, from a theological perspective, is the drift from speaking of lay ecclesial ministers participating in certain tasks more proper to the ordained to speaking of lay ecclesial ministry itself as a participation in the ministry of the ordained. What does it mean to say, as does the promotional literature provided by the Archdiocese of Chicago, that lay ecclesial ministers “participate in the ministry of the local bishop”?⁸ The language is ambiguous. On the one hand, the word “participate” could be read simply as a way of affirming the close collaboration and support among various ministers, a collaboration that is conscious of the distinctions laid out in Co-Workers. On the other hand, “participate” could be read as blurring ministerial roles, undercutting the baptismal source of ministry, and elevating the bishop as the font out of which all ministry flows. The broader context of the Chicago literature and program suggest the former. The language of participation itself suggests the latter.

Bishop as Center

I would like to suggest another image: not the bishop as source, but the bishop as center. This move will require reconsidering the two dimensions of Vatican II’s teaching on the episcopacy—the historical narrative of succession and the philosophical principle of “fullness”—by looking at each in light of the intentions of the council participants. In both cases, it seems that the council was “looking above” the bishop to his relationship with the universal church, especially the pope. Keeping this in mind helps us to better contextualize what the final documents actually say about apostolic succession and the bishop’s “fullness.” It also invites us

to seek out those places where the council “looks below” the bishop to his relationship with various ministries within the local church.

Consider the first example. In terms of the historical narrative of apostolic succession, the point of the early articles in chapter three of Lumen Gentium was not to present a rigorous assessment of the historical development of the monoepiscopate. Rather, the historical narrative served as the framework to make a more important point, namely, that Christ called and sent the Apostles as a college or group. From this claim, the text argues that the college of bishops today, precisely as a college or group, has inherited this charge. The narrative served simply as the means to get at the council’s real focus: episcopal collegiality. The intention of the council participants here—their point—was to emphasize collegiality in order to correct a century of over-emphasis on papal primacy. They were “looking above.”

But what if we look at this issue “from below”? Since the council, several commentators have pointed out that one of the weaknesses of Vatican II’s treatment of episcopal collegiality is that it sees the bishop’s membership in the episcopal college preceding the bishop’s relationship to a local church. This approach is evident in Lumen Gentium’s discussion of apostolic succession in articles 20-22, which presents the Apostles passing on the charge they received from Christ to their successors—with little reference to the communities over which they would preside. The college of bishops floats disconnected from any concrete community.

However, alongside this universalistic presentation of the bishop in articles 20-22, Lumen Gentium offers a more particularistic vision in article 23. Here the council participants are “looking below.” The treatment of the bishop begins not with his relationship to the college of bishops but with his relationship to his particular church. Drawing on the work of Hervé Legrand, Richard Gaillardetz points out that the universalistic vision of articles 20-22 and the

particularistic vision of article 23 are never really reconciled.⁹ The “looking below” passages exists alongside the “looking above” passages.

The point here is that present in Lumen Gentium, n. 23, and in other passages that take up the theme of the local church, such as Lumen Gentium, n. 26, Sacrosanctum Concilium, n. 41, and Christus Dominus, n. 11, are the seeds of an alternative to the vision of the bishop as source. It is the vision of the bishop as the center of a local church and its ministerial life.

Furthermore, ecumenical dialogue has pointed toward the need to conceive of apostolic succession in ministry within the larger context of apostolic succession of communities—another way of re-imagining the apostolic ministry within the center of an apostolic and ministerial community.¹⁰

Turning to our second example, the philosophical principle of the bishop’s “fullness,” we likewise gain insight from the context of the council. At Vatican II, the language of “fullness” was employed in order to affirm the full sacramentality of episcopal consecration. For centuries it was an open question whether ordination to the episcopacy was a sacrament. Theologians tended to imagine that what happened at episcopal consecration was that the bishop (already “ordained” a priest) simply received jurisdiction from the pope to lead a diocese. This gave the impression that a bishop was just a vicar, or delegate, of the pope. At Vatican II, the affirmation of the full sacramentality of episcopal consecration was, in part, an effort to correct this over-emphasis on the pope. The council participants were “looking above.” Their point was to emphasize that bishops are not vicars of the pope. They are vicars of Christ, endowed by Christ through ordination with the offices of sanctifying, teaching, and leading.

Moreover, if we examine those passages where the council participants “look below” the bishop to his relationship to other ministers, we find a caution against interpreting its teaching on “fullness” in terms of a Neo-Platonic descending hierarchy.

For example, in the debates surrounding Vatican II’s statements on the presbyter we see the council deliberately rejecting the view that the ministry of the presbyter is a participation in the ministry of the bishop.¹¹ At the time, some were arguing that priests receive their priesthood from a share in the bishop’s fullness. But the council distanced itself from this view in at least two ways. First, in order to affirm that Christ (and not the bishop) is the primary source of the presbyter’s ministry, the council made clear that it is Christ (not the bishop) who is the principal minister of ordination. Second, the council participants voted to remove from the draft of Lumen Gentium a phrase from the ordination prayer of the Sacramentarium Veronense that seemed to suggest a descending view. A new statement was drawn up to emphasize that the source of the priesthood of the presbyter is the priesthood of Christ.¹²

Thus, the trajectory of the debates and the final documents themselves (both Lumen Gentium and Presbyterorum Ordinis) emphasize that: (1) the sole source of the presbyteral priesthood is located in the priesthood of Christ, (2) the grace of ordination comes not from the bishop, but from Christ, and (3) presbyters depend on the bishop not for their ministerial power, but for the exercise of their power.

At least in terms of the bishop’s relationship to his presbyterate, the vision of the council is that of the bishop at the center of a group of ministers. Might we not extend this vision and imagine the bishop as not only the center of a *presbyterium*, but also the center of a *ministerium*—the center of a ministerial community that includes, among others, lay ecclesial ministers?

Conclusion

These remarks have charted the ways in which two theological claims—both present in the documents of Vatican II—risk supporting a vision of the bishop as the source of lay ecclesial ministry: (1) the historical narrative of apostolic succession and (2) the philosophical principle of the bishop’s “fullness.” However, when reconsidered in light of the intentions of the council participants, we see that these claims were made while the council was “looking above” the bishop. The concern of the council participants was to offer a theology of the episcopacy that corrected a theological over-emphasis on the role of the pope. Prudence suggests that we avoid using these conciliar claims to promote a new theological over-emphasis on the role of the bishop.

With such a caution, and with attention to those passages where the council “looks below” the bishop to his relationship to the local church, a different image emerges: not the bishop as source of all ministry, but the bishop as center of a ministerial community. If this is our image, if this is our vision, then we can confidently endorse, along with Co-Workers, a greater role for the bishop in the ongoing development of lay ecclesial ministry—a role understood precisely as the center of the ministerial life of the diocese, a center that promotes, coordinates, and directs lay ecclesial ministry within a dynamic ministering community.

¹ USCCB, Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2005) 23.

² Lumen Gentium, nn. 18-20; Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1536; John Paul II, On the Bishop, Servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the Hope of the World (Pastores Gregis), nn. 6-10.

³ Pius XI, “Discourse to Italian Catholic Young Women,” L’Osservatore Romano (21 March 1927) 14.

⁴ Lumen Gentium, n. 33; Apostolicam Actuositatem, n. 3.

⁵ “Editorial: In the Vineyard,” America 194 (16-23 January 2006) 4.

⁶ Thomas F. O’Meara, “Philosophical Models in Ecclesiology,” Theological Studies 39 (1978) 6-9.

⁷ Congregation for the Clergy et al., “Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Nonordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests,” Origins 27 (27 November 1997) 397-409.

⁸ “Because lay ecclesial ministers serve in the name of the Church and participate in the ministry of the local bishop, they should be ‘sent’ or ‘commissioned’ by the diocesan bishop to their ministerial assignments within the diocese.” In Together in God’s Service: Formation for Lay Ecclesial Ministry in the Archdiocese of Chicago (Chicago: University of St. Mary of the Lake/Mundelein Seminary, 2005) 5.

⁹ Richard R. Gaillardetz, The Church in the Making (New York: Paulist, 2006) 78-79. Hervé Legrand, “Collégialité des évêques et communion des églises dans la réception de Vatican II,” Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques 75 (1991) 545-68.

¹⁰ See Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, Faith and Order Paper, n. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982) nn. 34-38. The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement, Faith and Order Paper, n. 198 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005) nn. 68-73, 89.

¹¹ See David N. Power, Ministers of Christ and His Church: The Theology of the Priesthood (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1969) 127-40.

¹² The phrase that was dropped from the earlier draft of Lumen Gentium stated that bishops “communicate grace from their paternal fullness of it.” Cited in Bonaventure Kloppenburg, The Ecclesiology of Vatican II (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1974) 277.