

THE ALTERNATIVE

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Dear Reader,

This issue of the Newsletter is focused on the problems of the Roman Catholic church in the United States. However, the implications of this topic have a more catholic meaning. As many people have remarked, the crisis of the Roman Catholic church fit right in with the collapse of several business corporations and a more troubling collapse of credibility for the United States way of doing business.

In some ways the crisis of the Catholic church is worse than that of Enron or World Com because people who are affected had invested not just money but their whole life in the institution. But the church's problems affect others beyond Catholics.

The Catholic church has been a strong voice in several policy areas and a voice that now seems to be almost silent when it is sorely needed. Since 1983, the Catholic church has offered some of the most sustained criticism of United States militarism. Presidents do not admit it but they are sensitive to pressure from that source. Where is that voice at the moment when the United States government is about to launch one of the most risky military venture in its history

The other area where the Catholic church has a longer history of intelligent criticism is the government's policy on social welfare. The Republican House has just approved an even more draconian burden on the poor in its revision of the 1996 welfare law, proclaimed to be one of the great legislative successes in history. When that law was being debated, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan said that the only people who were speaking up for the poor were the U.S. Catholic Conference. Can anyone hear that voice today?

Gabriel Moran's essay is a proposal about changing the language and imagery of the church that would make reform possible. The other two essays are more specific in proposals of reform. They are written by people who have been patiently working at church reform for many decades. Joan Chittister and David O'Brien cannot be accused of being unrealistic or disloyal. They are among the

few who do not seem paralyzed by the current situation.

CHURCH HIERARCHY? YES

Gabriel Moran

The Roman Catholic church in the United States is suffering the worst crisis in its history. The crisis obviously involves scandalous sexual practices. But the bigger problem it now has is a crisis of authority which affects every aspect of its life. Some people may be gleeful at seeing this large and powerful institution in disarray. However, this church is a major supplier of social welfare in the nation's cities, and the precipitous decline in contributions to the church by its members does harm to many people. The Catholic church's authority problem is the most striking example of people losing their trust in major institutions.

The Roman Catholic bishops have been slow to grasp that their exercise of office is at the center of the feeling of betrayal. The clergy, as well as ordinary Catholics, are angry at the coverup of problems and the unwillingness to reform systems of authority that allowed such problems to fester. The loyal parishioners who have tried to voice their concerns have been slapped down in many dioceses. That only worsens the problem. The bishops, like other institutional leaders, are so intent on defending their authority that they cannot recognize who their true friends are.

Critics on both the left and the right within the church seem to agree on one thing. The current crisis of authority is rooted in the radical change of the 1960s when the Second Vatican Council was part of a larger cultural shift. Conservatives think that the church's authority was undermined because the changes went too far. Liberals think that the Council's actions were not carried far enough. Both sides see the 1968 papal encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, as expressive of the shift in authority. Conservatives think that the failure to come down hard on those Catholics who openly opposed the document's teaching on birth control is at the root of the authority problem. Liberals think that the document itself was a disastrous failure of authority.

In proposing any reforms of a large institution, the outsider has no power to get a hearing. And the insider's involvement with the ordinary mechanisms of power becomes an obstacle when another kind of change is needed. The only hope for radical reform is to get a linguistic opening that could unite liberal and conservative, and be a point on which insider and outsider could contribute. The fact that many people think such linguistic change is trivial is not all bad. For radical reform to occur there has to be an opening that does not get immediate opposition. Strident attacks on the existing institutional structure are simply rebuffed.

The starting point for such reform in the Roman Catholic church is the term hierarchy. For about 1500 years, this term has referred to a system or pattern of order. However, the current practice (by non-Catholics and Catholics alike) of

referring to bishops as 'the hierarchy' makes no historical, logical or practical sense. This way of speaking presents an insuperable obstacle to reforms from either the left or the right. The world needs some hierarchical institutions and the Roman Catholic church could make a great contribution by reforming its hierarchy. That hope cannot even be expressed so long as hierarchy is used to refer to a group of people who are actually within the hierarchy.

The chance of rehabilitating the term hierarchy for political, educational, religious and business institutions may be slim. But if it is to be done, the Catholic church would be a main place to try. Hierarchy gets regularly attacked in the contemporary world but an alternative is usually not clear. An egalitarian ideal is often what is offered in place of hierarchy but equality is not the way that any organization of more than ten people operates. Hierarchy is often assumed to mean a pyramid, an image which is clear and unambiguous. The flattening of pyramids does not of itself produce workable institutions.

For roughly the first half of its history, 'hierarchy' was not imagined as a pyramid but as a series of concentric circles. It was a description of the cosmos before it was (inadequately) applied to organizations. The hierarchy (sacred order) of creation was imagined to have God at the center with angels, humans, other animals and all manner of creatures in successive circumferences.

The Western church adopted the term at the time that its organizational pattern was being fixed in the twelfth century. The pattern that was thought necessary at the time was a series of 'holy orders' structured as a pyramid. The sixteenth-century church reform was over the inadequacies of the hierarchy's form but no Christian church has entirely resolved the issue. The Roman Catholic church's defense of its hierarchy gave it stability in modern times but that hierarchy is now in drastic need of reform. The Protestant churches are one source from which the Catholic church can learn, without ceasing to be the Catholic church.

A hierarchical church today has to be structured as concentric circles of interdependent communities. A hierarchy of authority arises from the sharing of power in which all the communities participate. Everyone in the church is a teacher; everyone is also a learner, although there are special roles that each person can play. The church officials who claim to exercise power in God's name have to be able to hear the voices of the communities that form the body of the church. A pyramid simply does not work; a hierarchy of communities with power vested in the center can work. But the organizational details of such a hierarchy are more complicated than in a pyramid.

Is there any chance of such a reform? There would be if conservatives could recognize that the proposal is genuinely conservative. A conservative movement should not be an attempt to restore the sixteenth or the nineteenth century. A conservative reform would value the whole history of the church and try to regain

the impulse that gave birth to the Christian movement. A defense of hierarchy may be hard for the left to swallow but it is the only way for the Roman Catholic church to undergo radical reform and not lose its identity.

An image of concentric circles is probably the most common religious symbol in human history. A church that claims catholicity can and should engage that image. The Roman Catholic church is being forced to think about authority in a way that few institutions do. It has the resources in its own history to demonstrate what today's hierarchy should be, a well-organized cluster of small groups in which power moves in and out from the center and authority is appropriately located at each circumference.

This change of language and imagery would have practical ramifications in every aspect of church life. The architecture of a church building, for example, should embody this design of hierarchy. Some modern churches do provide such space for liturgy. Some old churches have been redesigned in that direction. The Second Vatican Council began the reform of liturgy that has never been completed. The ministers for liturgical prayer should be surrounded by the community; together they make up the church hierarchy.

Every meeting place for church decisions should also manifest this character. Policies affecting church life should come from small communities in touch with those who are centrally responsible for decisions. Church officials are responsible for decisions but also responsible to the people. Open forums are good but they can be a way to deflect calls for change. The Catholic church needs a structured hierarchy in which communities can bring to bear carefully thought out proposals. Some imaginative thinking and sustained effort are needed by those who are in educational and pastoral work so as to give shape to the voices of faithful catholics who still have high regard for their church. Catholic tradition has conveyed to its members a sense of community that is remarkably strong. This generation of Catholics will need to find a way to channel that sense of belonging or it may be lost for generations to come.

VOICE OF FAITHFUL AND AUTHORITY By Joan Chittister

I'm never sure how to respond when people ask what I think about Voice of the Faithful. The fact is that I admire this group. But they confuse me. They have shown courage, integrity and control in the midst of great upheaval, deep pain

and an incredible amount of shock.

They are neither conservative nor liberal, they say. They are simply looking for a way for both conservatives and liberals to take their proper places in the experience that is church. Which translated means to be consulted, to be included, to be part of the decision making process of a church in process in a world in flux. While I myself try to avoid terms like liberal and conservative because of their power to label, stereotype, divide and categorize, I nevertheless get the point. We should all be heard.

But admire them as I do, that's exactly where they confuse me. Do they really believe they are agenda free? Do they really think they are independent of issues? Or is such a statement a kind of ecclesiastical guarantee of quality: We don't stand for any particular issue - like those other people do - so you don't need to be afraid that joining us will compromise your faith.

I can't help asking myself if these people are this disingenuous or this holy? How can anyone possibly think that what the Voice of the Faithful asserts they are about to do - give a voice to the faithful in the machinations of the Roman Catholic church - is not the single major determining issue in the church today? Bigger than Luther's commitment to the use of the vernacular in the reading of scripture, greater than Bartolome de las Casas' commitment to the full humanity of the Indians, bigger even on a daily basis than the implications of Galileo's commitment to the notion that the sun was the center of the universe, shocking as that was to the sensibilities of man, God's highest creature.

The truth is that to aspire to give a voice in the ongoing development and direction of the church stands for the biggest issue of them all: It stands for clericalization. And clericalization is the foundation for the renewal of the church. If the church is clericalized - if the laity really begins to be included in the theological debates, the canonical processes, the synodal decisions of the Roman Catholic church - every issue on the planet will become grist for its mill. The gospel of Jesus walking from Galilee to Jerusalem, curing lepers, healing paralytics, raising women from the dead, will live again.

Do they realize that concentrating on lay participation rather than on specific theological issues, they are really striking at the core of church development and power? They are targeting the biggest of them all, authority.

Clearly, whether they know it or not, Voice of the Faithful is definitely not issue-free. And, whether they realize it or not, their audacity is shaking the foundations of an imperial church that, until this time, has seldom felt the need to explain

anything, let alone ask questions of anyone other than those in their own inner circle. *A*Sensus fidelium@or no *A*sensus fidelium.@"

Before this is over, thanks to the Voice of the Faithful, issues like a married priesthood, the ordination of women, the use of inclusive pronouns in scripture, and the choice of postures during the canon of the Mass will seem to be exactly what they are - very, very minor. That's why I admire them: They are into the biggest issue of them all.

CHURCH REFORMS

By David O'Brien

In the need for church reforms, I suggest five things that seem obvious, at least to me.

1. Truthfulness. Needed in many dioceses are independent commissions, empowered to examine all the records, to issue public report on cases, dispositions and costs, and to explore the causes of the scandal and suggest reforms. They should work closely with the National Review Board, which is hoping to gather reliable data and study the causes of the scandal.

Opposition to the national commission is gathering strength, and none of this truth-telling will happen without organized pressure from outside the church bureaucracy. That means somebody has to gather and distribute reliable information, organize petitions, demonstrations, and open letters, lobby the chancery and constituencies who might be able to wield some power. Somebody must stand up and make proposals for truth-telling in those ordinary mechanisms of church governance that already exist.

2. Shared Responsibility. Immediate steps should be taken to more effectively organize *A*the people of God@in the local church by evaluating and strengthening (or reviving) diocesan and parish pastoral councils, finance committees, presbyteral councils, and senates of religious, along with related committees. All Catholics, and especially those who work for the church, should immediately demand that this review and renewal take place, and they should offer to help.

For priests and deacons, ministry is corporate and constitutive: they are a presbyterate united with one another and their bishop. If the organization does not work well, they must fix it and stop whining that *A*the bishop won't let us.@" While in many places people have become cynical about pastoral councils, there are places where they work better. There is also a body of knowledge about how to make them work.

Retrieval of embryonic reforms inviting wide consultation in the selection of bishops, introduced during the 1970s tenure of Apostolic Delegate Jean Jadot, would also help. Boston would be a good place to start, and Voice of the Faithful has invited local Catholics to speak up. Until such instruments of shared responsibility are up and running, anxiety about lay power or creeping Unitarianism is simply silly. Even the modest project of evaluating and reforming existing structures of shared responsibility is unlikely to be initiated from the top; interested parties who care about the church must do it or it won't happen

3. Organization. Strong organizations for priests, deacons, pastoral ministers, and other groups, including lay groups, are indispensable. Independent organizations always make sense if people are to have a voice, but they are especially crucial as long as share responsibility structures like pastoral councils are entirely subject to the bishop, who can, if he wishes, set the agenda, call or not call meetings and decide whether to seek or accept advice. It is important for priests and bishops to trust their people, but it is also vital that people have the capacity to speak up, strongly and independently, to their bishops and priests. .

For priests and religious, that means getting involved with their existing national organizations and organizing their own local associations to set forth the pastoral needs of the local church, put pressure on institutional structures, and encourage hesitant lay people to join in. For lay people, it means joining national Voice of the Faithful, sending it a check, organizing local chapters, supporting the National Review Board, finding out what needs to be done in each diocese, and making sure it gets done. If Voice of the Faithful is too scary, lay people must find a comparable vehicle, and not complain unless they have joined or formed an organization designed to take on the responsibility that rests on all of us.

4. Common Ground. Cardinal Bernadin's proposal for a common-ground strategy of disciplined dialogue among differing Catholic groups was intended to bridge dangerous ideological divisions by drawing attention to shared faith and mission. It enjoyed only limited success because important cardinals decided it was not needed; the *Catechism* and guidance of Rome provided all the common ground the church required. The project evoked limited support, even from those with a stake in Catholic intellectual life.

Of course, dialogue among contending groups is not an ideological weapon but a practice indispensable to the vitality and unity of the church in a free and pluralistic society. Theologians, educators, and pastors all know this, but most sat on the sidelines while a few cardinals and self-defined orthodox factions made

the Common Ground project so controversial (read Aiberal@ that even independent but skittish colleges and universities would not touch it. Some sort of common ground effort to establish structures for civil conversation about the church, its mission, ministries, and organizational policy and practice is not a Aobby horse.@ Rather, it is a vehicle for action for anyone who claims to speak from the center and for Athe good of the church.@ Such a dialogue should be undertaken by every Catholic college and university, even by independent Catholic high schools. Let-s face it: In the United States the existence of a Catholic church with integrity and intelligence, where differences can be discussed in the open, cannot be taken for granted.

5. Pastoral Ministry. The perpetrators of sexual abuse in almost all cases were pastoral ministers. They worked in parishes, or in pastoral offices in schools and hospitals. The scandal has damaged, badly damaged, the fabric of trust that helps define a parish or pastoral community. As its effect is felt, the damage spreads, to church-sponsored educational, charitable, and medical institutions, to the credibility of Catholic word and witness on problems like abortion, war and economic justice. It poisons the very integrity of the Catholic identity shared by all members of the community of faith.

What sustains the church, as one looks around the smoldering ruins of Catholic life, say in Boston or in Worcester, where I live? Good pastoral care: dedicated priests and pastoral staffs in parishes that people regard as their own, dedicated Christians serving the needs of people in neighborhoods, classrooms, hospitals; small groups of believers experiencing in prayer and service the solidarity of the Body of Christ now less visible in the larger church. From now on, let it be clear that the heart and soul of American Catholicism lies in its always-forming, always-renewing face-to-face communities.

Ministry is and will remain mainly a matter of what used to be called the A cure of souls,@ people helping one another find their way to God-s people, all of them. From now on, for Catholics of the center, parish renewal, energetic movements, and reforms to support them should constitute, yes, an agenda. So a last action item: Let every organization that claims the word Catholic take the time to do a pastoral self-assessment and develop a new pastoral plan. In shorthand, that was what Vatican II invited all Catholic communities to do.

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