

# THE ALTERNATIVE

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Dear Reader,

We return in this issue to a topic dealt with in February: the reform of the Roman Catholic church. A few hopeful changes have occurred, such as in Boston, but the institution seems rather frozen in regard to structural reform. Given the importance of this church in the welfare agencies of the United States, the crisis is of some significance for all citizens.

The present issue has three guest essays and a final one by Gabriel Moran. The three writers are as well positioned as any three persons in the country to understand church reform. Peter Steinfels has been editor of *Commonweal* and religion editor at the *New York Times*. His bi-weekly pieces in the *Times* about religious matters are gems of insight. Philip Murnion was for decades a leading light of intellectual and spiritual reform at the National Pastoral Life Center. The letter to the bishops printed here was written two days before his death on August 19. Rembert Weakland is the retired Archbishop of Milwaukee. He was clearly the intellectual leader of the bishops' conference for many years. He speaks candidly of tensions between the Vatican and the church in the United States.

AT THE HELM  
By Peter Steinfels

The church's future cannot be understood apart from the astonishing emergence of a new category of Catholic leadership that has already quietly transformed much of church life.

Before the 1960s, priests staffed parishes. Sisters ran the schools. Lay people were volunteers, except perhaps for the rectory cook, the parish janitor, and the part-time organist or choir director. Today there are over thirty thousand lay parish ministers paid for at least twenty hours a week, working in over sixty percent of the nation's parishes. Seventy percent work full-time. They are running religious education programs, parish liturgy and music, youth ministry, home care for the sick and elderly, community and social justice programs, prayer and Bible study groups, marriage preparation and family support services, and a myriad of other pastoral activities. Some have specialized fields, like the directors of religious education or liturgists. Some are general parish ministers whose work, with the exception of administering the sacraments, covers almost the full range of responsibilities.

traditionally carried out by priests. Some are pastoral coordinators who oversee parishes that no longer have a resident pastor.

In the five years after 1992 alone, the ranks of this category of church leader increased by 35 percent. By 1997 the number of these lay ministers surpassed the number of parish priests. Almost three-quarters of these ministers view themselves as engaged in a life's work. Half feel they have received a call from God, and at least another quarter appear to be motivated more by some concept of religious service than personal fulfillment.

New circumstances, new religious needs, and new spiritual energies have fused into an extraordinary innovation in American Catholic life. Some observers see this development as akin to the emergence in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries of new kinds of religious orders more appropriate than the old rural monasticism to Europe's nascent culture of town and city; or akin to the explosion of women's religious orders and Catholic workers' movement that responded to the conditions created by industrialization, urbanization and immigration in the nineteenth century; or akin to the institutional creativity that forged the pennies, talents and dedication of Catholic immigrants into the network of schools, hospitals, orphanages, and social agencies.

Two decades ago a majority of lay ministers doing pastoral work were sisters. Although sisters are technically lay because they are not ordained, and though they often sought these positions on their own rather than being assigned by their orders, the distinctly lay character of the new leadership may have been initially obscured. Sisters, after all, do occupy a special, in-between status as vowed members of religious orders. Today over 70 percent of these parish ministers are fully lay, many of them married; and because the sisters active in parish work are aging and not being replaced by new members in their orders, the percentage of unambiguously lay ministers will increase. The married have lives centered in family, anxious spouses, after-school play groups, difficult teenagers, recitals, report cards, mortgages and college tuitions. Many of the unmarried are normally intent on dating and courtship. All remain free to take and leave their positions, as one would a job. And at least up to the present, they are freely hired and fired by pastors without respect to their continuing in any role in the ministry.

The feminine character of this development is clear. More than 80 percent of the lay pastoral ministers are women. Questions and sessions about women's role in the church are clearly not going to subside. In addition, parish ministries, regardless of who carries them out, are increasingly activities - education, caregiving, nurture and support - often associated with women in our culture. Understanding and empathy count more than authority; and a relational style of working is increasingly a hallmark of parish staffs, adopted by priests and other males.

Because centralization of power has long appeared to be a dominant trend in the Catholic church, certainly during the papacy of John Paul II, perhaps the most surprising aspect of the emerging lay parish ministry is the major growth in local power it represents. Bishops have traditionally controlled who exercised ministry in parishes. Directly or through appointees, bishops decided who would pursue seminary studies and be ordained. Bishops decided who would be assigned to which parishes and eventually be promoted to become pastors. Bishops ultimately determined diocesan practices for limiting assignments and making new ones. Lay parish ministers, by contrast, have almost always been hired and fired by the pastor, who often chooses them from active parishioners and increasingly involves the parish council or the current staff members in these decisions. In effect, oversight of what now constitutes the majority of the nation's pastoral leaders has shifted from bishop to pastor and diocese to parish.

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## DIALOGUE, DIALOGUE, DIALOGUE

By Philip Murnion

In his final address on Oct. 24, 1996, Cardinal Joseph Bernadin spoke these moving words: "A dying person does not have time for the peripheral or the accidental. He or she is drawn to the essential, the important - yes, the eternal. And what is important my friends is that we find that unity with the Lord and within the community of faith for which Jesus prayed so fervently on the night before he died."

Now in God's providence, I too write this reflection as a dying person, with no time for the peripheral or accidental. In many ways the crisis in the church and the ensuing polarization, which so preoccupied Cardinal Bernadin, have only grown more acute. Your credibility and ability to guide God's people have been severely compromised.

It is time for bold initiatives. I do not presume to know all the dimensions of such undertakings. But of this I am convinced: They must emerge from the deepest discernment of God's will and the widest consultation of God's people.

In the mind of the pope, there is no contradiction between legitimate authority and careful consultation. Consultation, listening and dialogue only enhance true authority, because they issue from a lived trust. It is imperative that we work together to restore the trust that has been eroded.

If I were to sum up my final plea to you, it would be "Dialogue, dialogue, dialogue." I do not mean this as a facile or pious slogan, for I am only too aware of the cost and conditions. In his letter, the Pope advocates and advances a "theology and spirituality of communion, for they encourage a fruitful dialogue between pastors and faithful." Does not the living out of such a spirituality of communion require dialogue as its very life-breath: the dialogue of prayer with Jesus Christ, the dialogue of mutual binding up

on the part of the members of Christ?

A spirituality of communion and dialogue is as demanding in its asceticism as a spirituality of the desert or the cloister. Like them, it also requires its own appropriate structures. The Catholic tradition knows well that spirituality and structure are not opposed. Here as elsewhere it affirms the both/and of charism and institution, invisible grace and visible embodiment. We can ill afford to be less Catholic than the Pope who insists: *The spirituality of communion, by prompting a trust and openness wholly in accord with the dignity and responsibility of every member of the people of God, supplies institutional reality with a soul.*<sup>2</sup>

For more than twenty years I have been blessed by working with many of you in different programs of the National Pastoral Life Center. I know from experience that many have sought diligently to consult and communicate with your priests and people alike. But in this time of crisis, of both possibility and peril, we face the urgent need imaginatively to expand present structures and to create new ones that will enable us to draw more effectively upon the rich wisdom of those baptized.

Permit me then with the last breaths the Spirit gives me to implore you: Do not be afraid to embrace this spirituality of communion, this *little way*<sup>3</sup> of dialogue with one another, with your priests, with all God's faithful. Doing so you will touch not only the hearts of your brothers and sisters; you will draw closer to the very heart of Jesus, the Lord and brother of us all.

## LOOKING FORWARD

By Rembert Weakland

How often have we heard it said that the church is not a democracy, that truth is not determined by popular vote? We know this to be true, but we have also learned that this does not mean responsibility for the church's mission can't be more widely shared, especially in areas not determinative of the content of faith. Moreover, from church history we can enumerate many examples of democratic processes that are employed to discern the actions of the Holy Spirit. The selection of a new pope, for example, takes place by means of an election. In the early church, the faithful often selected their bishops.

After twenty-five years of working under limiting structures, I have reached the following conviction: Because the church around the world is highly diversified, some form of legitimate decentralization must take place, and soon. Any restructuring must give local churches the freedom they need to employ all the faithful - clergy and laity alike - in finding solutions to their problems, taking into account the cultural milieu in which the faithful live and work.

In thinking about structural reform in the church, two issues are critical. First, any change must respect the traditions of the church. Thus, the role of the pope and the college of bishops must be honored and maintained. Although Catholics would agree that the Holy Spirit is the source of unity, the bishop of Rome is more than simply a symbol of that unity. Catholics are rightfully wary about the lack of visible unity that characterizes our Protestant brothers and sisters. Catholics desire a strong, effective authority, and we believe in the primacy of Peter. At the same time, the role of the local bishop and the concept of collegiality must be further examined and enhanced. We may not have yet determined the exact formula for the dynamic that should exist among bishops and the pope (the synods of bishops are too controlled to be an effective instrument of collegiality), but we do not want to eliminate either the pope or the college of bishops.

Second, structure follows vision and mission. In talking about genuine structural reform, we must keep in mind Friedrich Von Hugel's classic description of the church in its institutional, mystical and intellectual dimensions. We must be on guard that none of these critical elements of the church's life and mission are diminished. I believe the mystical or spiritual dimension needs special emphasis now, and that finding a spirituality that corresponds to the needs of Catholics in the twenty-first century must be our primary concern. And since spirituality is vitally influenced by particular cultures, there won't be a single solution for the whole church. Moreover, since spirituality has been influenced traditionally by the religious orders, their renewal must be strongly encouraged.

Von Hugel's notion of the intellectual tradition must include rededication not only to scholarship but to the aesthetic elements of the church. Large numbers of theologians today, especially women, seek to make major contributions. This phenomenon presents an ideal situation for an intellectual renewal. Unfortunately, the ferment needed for aesthetic development in art and music lags. In liturgy we have fallen back on rubricism. In art there has been a return to kitsch. Ditto in music, where the market has determined what is sold, used, and fostered. Since renewal of the intellectual and aesthetic aspects of the church's life will be determined by particular cultures, any attempt at centralized renewal will prove self-defeating.

Von Hugel also saw the need for structural renewal. Before this can take place, however, there must be a clearer analysis of how the visible structures of the church relate to the societies in which they are incarnated. Perhaps no other question is so divisive as how the church as an institution and its individual members ought to position themselves in relation to contemporary society. How countercultural should the church be? How we answer that question will determine how the church ought to be structured and what kind of priorities we will settle on in each locality.,

## HOW TO REFORM THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES By Gabriel Moran

The answer to the question posed in the above title is: with a few simple words. Of course, the reform would not be completed with these words. But attention to these words is necessary before radical reform can begin. Until these words are scrutinized, there can be no answers for questions that cannot be asked. When those questions can be formulated, then other questions will emerge.

At present, the Roman Catholic church in the United States is in a crisis unlike anything in its history. Almost all Roman Catholics in the United States, as well as many other people, recognize the need for a fundamental change. This is true of people whether they are called liberal or conservative. However, no one has a plan or a Roadmap of reform. If anyone did have the right plan, he or she could probably not find the words to express it. Or if the person somehow did have the right words, almost no one else would understand the plan.

The Roman Catholic church in the United States is entering a period of crisis, a term that means there is opportunity for genuine improvement - or serious failure. (Much like the opportunity for the United States government in the weeks and months following Sept. 2001. From today's vantage point the United States government seems to have flubbed the opportunity and made things much worse.)

An institution does not examine the way it describes itself unless it is pressured by crisis. An institution encapsulates itself in comfortable assumptions of language that do not distract from the institution's activities. But language that once made sense or could be asserted because no one objected to the words can become obstructive. The terms are so embedded in the institution's self-description as to be almost invisible.

I realize that institutions, especially religious institutions, do not run on the basis of completely logical language. Some words have a wealth of connotations that cannot be appreciated by an outsider. Reformers who strip mine an institution of whatever seems illogical, outdated or ineffective usually do harm to the institution and cannot rebuild what has been flattened. Nonetheless, it is necessary to be insistent about a few key terms that obstruct thinking. This kind of reform should not be called liberal or conservative; it is a recovery of the past by placing it into a fuller context in the present.

I will examine six terms or phrases that fit into this category. Each would require a book-length study to document where the term came from and what happens if people start using it differently. All I can do here is point to the fact that these terms are badly misused today and prevent us from thinking about the future.

1) Hierarchy. I pointed out in this Newsletter last February that Hierarchy is probably

the single most important word that needs to be changed. The Catholic church invented the term and, surprisingly, taught other institutions to use it. But now the Roman Catholic church seems to be almost alone in misusing the term. *Hierarchy* is now used to refer to the bishops, a usage that makes no logical or historical sense. Until *Hierarchy* (sacred order) refers to the pattern of the institution rather than a group within the institution, few meaningful questions of reform can be asked. I pointed out in the earlier essay that the image of hierarchy for many centuries was concentric circles rather than a pyramid. It was a mystical and cosmic term before it was applied to the institution of the Christian church. The recovery of a richer meaning of hierarchy may or may not be possible, but at present one cannot ask the question.

2) Catholic education. In the nineteenth century, society began to identify *Education* with schools for children, grades one to twelve. At the same time, the Roman Catholic church in the United States expressed the desire and the intention to have all its children in its own schools. One can easily see why *Catholic education* came to be used for the system of parish and diocesan schools (and later *Catholic higher education*). By the 1960s, however, whatever logic there had been in the term *Catholic education* was no longer operative. *Education*, after a century's interim, was slowly returning to a lifelong and lifewide process. In addition, the vast majority of Roman Catholic children did not attend schools under the auspices of the church. There was a moment in the late 1960s when the language seemed ready to change, but the moment passed. Thirty-five years later we cannot discuss all the ways that education is provided by the Roman Catholic church and all the ways that Roman Catholics are educated because *Catholic education* is still so illogically used.

3. Religious education. The use of *Religious education* is a much younger term than *Catholic education* but intimately related. Religious education was not a common term in the Roman Catholic church in the United States until the late 1960s. The term had been used in the United States, mostly by Protestants, since the beginning of the twentieth century and in England, mostly in the state school, since the 1940s. The adoption by the Roman Catholic church in the United States opened the possibility of a conversation both among religious groups and also between school and non-school approaches to education. When new parochial forms of education were tried, they were called *Religious education*. That would not be bad except the contrast was to *Catholic education*, that is, the school system run by the church. Thus, one had the paradox that the Catholic school was not engaged in religious education. The pairing of *Religious education* and *Catholic education* makes no sense in any educational discussion within the Roman Catholic church. It also isolates Roman Catholics from the conversation that United States society needs.

4) Religious Life. The use of *Religious life* to refer to nuns and monks is longstanding. It goes back to a reform movement in which a few Christians would try to exemplify the full demands of the Christian gospel. (*Religion/religious* was part of the virtue of

justice). Over the centuries, the meaning of *Religion* changed to being a general term for Christian, Jewish, Muslim and other communities. And in the United States, as well as much of the modern world, the education of all Christians to live the Christian gospel has been the task. To say that less than one percent of Roman Catholics live *the religious life* makes no sense today. The continued attribution of this phrase to nuns and monks has been no help to them. And a discussion of the religious life of Roman Catholics is impossible.

5) *Faithful*. The use of *Faithful* to refer to nonordained Roman Catholics may be one of those terms of intimacy that have a long history. But, at the least, the term should not be used in contrast to clergy, priest or bishop. Surely, it should not be implied that they are faithless. To be faithful is what all Roman Catholics are called to be, as are Protestant, Jewish or Muslim people. Related to this use of *Faithful* is the contrast of clergy/laity. This contrast does have a logic to it and the terms cannot simply be removed. After some other changes occur, the language of clergy/laity might become unnecessary. If, for the present, church officials wish to claim that *Laity* can have a positive meaning (its original meaning being *The people*), then church laity, like faithful, should always be used as inclusive of priests and bishops.

6) *Catholic church in America*. In trying to reform an institution, it is most important to name it accurately. The focus here is the Roman Catholic church that currently exists in the nation-state, called the United States of America. This nation-state has a confusion built into its history and the danger has been magnified as the nation has become more powerful. The nation identifies itself with the religious dream, *America* (and by so doing lays claim to North, South and Central America). It is important for traditional religions such as Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities that they resist the nation giving itself a religious mission. The *Catholic church in America* is an inaccurate way to refer to the Roman Catholic church in the United States. Roman Catholics in the United States enjoy the benefits that the ideology of *America* has entailed. But the Roman Catholic church has to resist the dangerous religious impulse, domestic and foreign, in the United States of America. And perhaps it is the calling of the Roman Catholic church in the United States to open a serious dialogue about America (North, South and Central). The United States government is not likely to do that but the Roman Catholic church might be able to.

I think that these six terms/phrases would make a good starting place. Someone else might make a case that these are not the most important six. That could be a useful discussion but there is no need to get complete agreement on the top four, six or ten. The important thing is the willingness to consistently use such terms with more precision. That in turn would reveal the next step.

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Alternative Religious Education, Box 1405, Montauk, NY 11954  
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