

Vatican II themes: The church as communion

Richard McBrien | Aug. 8, 2011 | Essays in Theology

The late Cardinal John Dearden, archbishop of Detroit, noted at the University of Notre Dame some years ago that many of the bishops appointed after the Second Vatican Council never had the opportunity of experiencing the transforming effect of Vatican II.

For those bishops, like himself, who directly participated in the council, it was as if they had gone on a four-year retreat, a retreat that changed and enriched their understanding of the church.

Most of these bishops emerged from the council as new men, ready to serve their dioceses with deeper dedication than before.

What was true of the pre-Vatican II bishops was also true of the pre-Vatican II laity. A layperson today would have to be over 60 years old to have any meaningful memory of the pre-Vatican II church. Without that memory, one would find it very difficult -- not impossible, to be sure -- to appreciate what the council did for the church.

That is why mainly older Catholics are drawn to lay organizations such as Call to Action and Voice of the Faithful. It is not that younger Catholics have no interest in church renewal and reform, but they have never personally experienced the pre-Vatican II church nor the achievements wrought by the council itself.

Older Catholics -- in their 60s, 70s, 80s, and some few in their 90s -- know what the pre-Vatican II church was like and how much better it became because of Pope John XXIII and the council he convened. That is why many of them have been disheartened by what they regard as a kind of retrenchment under Pope John Paul II and now Benedict XVI, and many of the bishops they appointed.

Many younger Catholics -- at least those who care enough to remain more or less active in the church -- do not appreciate why many older Catholics are so unhappy with the state of the church today.

For the past several weeks this column has been underscoring some of the most important ecclesiological principles espoused by the council. This week the emphasis is on the council's teaching that the church is a *communion* -- a communion between God and ourselves (the vertical dimension) and a communion of ourselves with one another in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit (the horizontal dimension).

Because the church is a communion, its institutional structure is collegial rather than monarchical.

Understanding the church as a communion also means that the church is not a single international parish under the pastoral leadership of the pope, subdivided into dioceses and parishes for administrative efficiency only.

The church is a communion of local churches, or dioceses, each of which is the Body of Christ in its own particular place (*Lumen gentium*, n. 26).

Together these local churches constitute the universal church. Their unity one with another is rooted in the presence and sanctifying activity of the Holy Spirit, manifested especially in the celebration of the Eucharist.

This communal notion of the church underscores the traditional importance of councils, synods, and conferences of bishops in the life and structure of the church, operative especially during the first Christian millennium and in the East generally throughout both millennia.

Especially in those areas of the world like our own, in the United States and Canada, where democratic, collaborative, and participatory forms of governance are taken for granted, the church, too, needs to act in an increasingly collegial and collaborative manner.

Presbyteral councils, in union with the bishops, must exercise deliberative as well as consultative authority, but always in collaboration with other conciliar or synodal expressions of the local church, including in particular the diocesan pastoral council.

The church's mode of activity will necessarily differ from region to region. It will take longer, for example, in some regions of the world to accept a married clergy or the presence of women in positions of real pastoral authority than in other regions, like our own.

But such developments as these are inevitable, even though some bishops, such as William Morris of Australia, have been sacked for even raising the possibility.

No one can hold back the future -- or the irrepressible work of the Holy Spirit. For it is the Holy Spirit, not the hierarchy, not even the pope, who governs the church and leads it through all of human history to its final destiny in the Kingdom of God.

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Over the next several weeks, Fr. McBrien's columns will explore the major ecclesiological themes or principles proclaimed at the Second Vatican Council.

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