

Renewal of papacy will transform church

Bernard Cooke | Jun. 17, 2013
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[Editor's note: This story originally appeared in the Feb. 24, 1995, issue of NCR. [Bernard Cooke](#)[1], an educator who foresaw the need for well-formed lay theologians, died May 31, 2013, in San Antonio. He was 91.]

(First of three parts)

Theologian Bernard Cooke here begins a three-part examination of the role of the pope in contemporary times.

[In Part 1](#)[2], Cooke explains the need to ask basic questions about the nature and role of the papacy, based on growing knowledge of the historical Jesus.

[In Part 2](#)[3], Cooke considers the person and message of Jesus and his attitude toward power, and discusses the historical role of bishops in relation to the pope.

[In Part 3](#)[4], Cooke suggests that carefully considered change in Christianity's concept of the papacy holds the power to bring the church and humankind closer to realizing the reign of God.

In the wake of the Vatican's most recent and counterproductive attempt to close discussion about women's roles in the church and its veto of inclusive language, the time may have come to ask bluntly, but not antagonistically, some very basic questions about the nature and role of the papacy in the life of the church.

Not that these questions are entirely new. There has been a mounting chorus of responsible voices within the church, from a wide range of people, suggesting that the prevalent attitude of many Catholics toward the papacy and some recent statements emanating from the Vatican are an over-reading of the true authority and power of the Holy See.

The mere suggestion that we need to reconsider the role of the papacy will, of course, bring a charge of "pope-bashing" from some quarters. However, an honest examination of the papal role is itself a tribute to the papacy; one does not concern oneself about things one does not cherish and think important.

The most recent papal document on women elicited not only a strong negative response from those committed to righting the present ecclesiastical injustice toward half of the church's membership but also a somewhat puzzled response from ecclesiologists.

In an article in *The Tablet*, Jesuit Fr. Francis Sullivan, one of the most balanced and astute experts on papal teaching authority, noted that the document represented an unprecedented demand by the pope that Catholics assent to his view. Sullivan did not pass any judgment on this papal claim, but the essay suggested obliquely that new questions had been raised and needed attention.

Much recent public reflection on the papacy has been more general and more basic. To take but one example: In recent months, *America* magazine has published a number of articles by leading students of ecclesiastical

authority -- Gaillardetz, Fogarty, Reese, Wright -- all asking serious questions about the nature and limits of the Vatican's role in the teaching activity of the church.

Without stating it explicitly, all are suggesting that the key view of Vatican II regarding the collegiality of pope and bishops has yet to be absorbed in official thinking or honored in papal behavior.

The idea of *communio*

The same tension has surfaced, most importantly in the periodic synods of bishops since Vatican II, in debate about the idea of *communio* as applied to the church. By general admission, *communio* was a focal concept in Vatican II's revision of Catholic thinking about the character of the church, but since the council there has been much less than agreement about its exact implication and application.

If this description of the church is seen to be more appropriate than descriptions that are organizational in character, "collegiality" finds an applicability far beyond the relation between pope and bishops; it is a characteristic of the people of God as a whole. As a result, notions like *magisterium* take on a broader and less authority-based meaning than that presently understood in official circles.

While not widely publicized, there has been forthright and forward-looking discussion of papal primacy in the so-called "bilateral groups" (Catholic-Lutheran, Catholic-Anglican, and so forth), which consist of representative bishops and theologians from the Christian churches in question.

One of the most carefully researched and thoughtful, and unfortunately little-known, essays was that of Patrick Burns in the Lutheran-Catholic study of the papacy.

The historical evidence he detailed indicates that for centuries the prevailing understanding of the church was of a *communio* of local churches, an understanding that gradually gave way to a monarchical view that focused on the bishop of Rome.

Much of the reflection on papal teaching authority came to a head immediately before and after the publication of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. Along with the large-scale non-reception by Catholics of the letter's teaching on contraception and its conditioned reception by bishops worldwide, there ensued in Catholic theological circles a serious discussion about the nature and limits of the pope's teaching authority in matters of ethical judgment.

The highly publicized statement of the theological faculty at Catholic University was but one of a number of dissenting responses by leading Catholic scholars. Symptomatically, in *Theological Studies'* annual "Notes on Moral Theology," comment before as well as after the encyclical was directed in large part to the question of papal teaching authority.

Reconsideration of the papal role is not only a post-Vatican II phenomenon. Actually it led up to the council. The two decades preceding Vatican II were marked by an explosion of publication regarding the nature and structure of the church's hierarchy. Much of this scholarly output came from people like Yves Congar who were the shapers of the council's thinking and documents.

In one important essay, for example, Congar traced the process through which, in the Middle Ages, the traditional function of the bishops as collegial advisers to the papacy was preempted by a new collegial reality, the College of Cardinals.

Questioning infallibility

As early as Vatican I itself, and up to the present, there has been considerable uneasiness among many church historians and ecclesiologists in regard to the notion of "infallibility" as it is applied to the pope. Serious questions have been raised about the freedom of the bishops at Vatican I; even more basic questions have arisen about applying the term "infallible" to anything or anyone except God.

None of this leads yet to the conclusion that papal claims to unquestioned authority in teaching and in governing the Roman Catholic Church are unjustified. Still, it does seem clear that a number of fundamental questions need to be addressed, either to revise Catholic ecclesiology or to provide stronger grounding for present papal teaching and behavior. This article and two succeeding articles will suggest some of these questions and expand a bit on the context in which they have recently surfaced in more acute form.

It is important, though, to keep in mind that raising these questions by no means presupposes that they lead to a negative conclusion that serious scholarly research and reflection will necessarily bring into doubt long-standing Catholic beliefs about the pope.

Similar fears held us back as we began to apply careful critical study to the Bible and to church history; the fears have proved groundless because careful scholarship has actually deepened our understanding of and appreciation for these sources of our faith. Serious, competent and thoroughly honest study of the primacy of the bishop of Rome can only enhance the true understanding and implementation of the papal role.

Because the papacy has played such a prominent role in a church that we believe to be an agent of God's saving work in history, examination of the papacy's nature and function immediately raises questions about every aspect of soteriology, and judgments about these other issues inevitably condition our view of the pope's role.

A third article will look at the way in which understanding of the papacy is influenced by present-day revisions in our understanding of what salvation means, of what God is doing to influence human life. This article will point to only a few of the questions that more directly touch on the activity today of the pope himself and of the Vatican bureaucracy.

1. Given the perspective of Christian faith that sees God's Spirit as a continuing creative influence in the ongoing life of the church, what was the actual emergence in history of a preeminent role for the bishop of Rome?

Accepting careful historical study about the role of Peter himself, about the late emergence of a monoepiscopate in Rome, about the relatively minor role of Rome in the earliest great doctrinal councils, about the sociopolitical forces that brought the medieval papacy to prominence and influenced the modern role and understanding of the pope, believing Catholic thinkers need to ask how much of the papal claims to authority and power are intrinsic to the nature of the church.

As one works carefully through the history of the papacy, a basic question surfaces a number of times: Does the pope's claim to unquestioned authority constitute a basis for the legitimacy of the claim, or is there in the unformulated belief of the Christian community some kind of underlying presumption of this ultimate papal prerogative?

The rejection of these claims by Eastern Christianity and by mainstream Reformation churches, and the centuries-long tension between bishops and popes in the West, indicate that this area still demands serious inquiry.

2. To what extent is the kind of power and authority claimed and exercised by the papacy consonant with the kind of power and authority claimed and exercised by Jesus of Nazareth? Is there really a place in the church for

monarchical authority when Jesus himself repudiated political power and when Jesus and the earliest Christian generations needed to radically reinterpret "Messiah," rejecting the implication of kingship that had been central to Jewish expectations, and replacing it with the prophetic character of Jesus' ministry?

Monarch or listener

3. If one does accept a papal role as central to the church's life, how is "central" to be understood? There are several possibilities.

In one scenario, for example, the pope not only guides and instructs doctrinally everyone else in the church, including the bishops, but also controls the moral decisions, ministerial activity and ritual life of Christians worldwide -- and does so as an absolute religious monarch who stands above any judgment except that of God. In this way he functions as a centripetal unifying principle, at least for those who accept this authority.

In another scenario, the pope functions as the key "hearer of the word," listening and then giving voice to the movement of Christ's Spirit in the lives and belief of Christians throughout the world, encouraging those who share in special fashion the prophetic charism inherent in the Christian community, supporting creative developments in the church's ministry and worship, witnessing by his own faith and life and utterances to the countercultural role of Christians as they struggle against oppression and the seduction of riches and power.

While the second scenario will most certainly not produce the homogeneity that has marked Roman Catholicism since the Council of Trent, it may lead to a deeper unity of faith created by the one Word and one Spirit of God.

Flowing from either of these two situations is the moral authority of the pope, extending far beyond the Roman Catholic community, by which he functions as a respected human voice advocating justice and peace in the world. This broader role has been exemplified in distinctive fashion by recent popes, notably by the present Roman pontiff in his social encyclicals and worldwide "pilgrimages."

4. To what extent has Roman Catholic understanding of the pope's power been grounded in an organizational/political model of the church that perhaps is not appropriate? If, instead, the church is more accurately described as a community of believers, a worldwide communio of local churches that are linked by belief in Jesus as the Christ and by God's Spirit in their midst, what does this do to our understanding of the papacy?

How do we appraise doctrinal statements about the role of the pope that interpret "perfect society" not as a model for the church but as the model?

More broadly, is our view of the church, and of the pope within the church, to be forever limited by the European cultural context in which our present understandings took shape?

As a very new world is coming into being, and a new role for Christianity within that world is possible, does not mature Christian discipleship demand that we face such questions and their implications, risky though they may be?

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Links:

[1] <http://ncronline.org/node/54086>

[2] <http://ncronline.org/node/54121>

[3] <http://ncronline.org/node/54126>

[4] <http://ncronline.org/node/54131>