

Papal pomp contrasts with simplicity of Jesus

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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.]

(Second 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.

Are the changes occurring in the Catholic Church a sign of decline, a lapse from truth and virtue? Some seem to think so, and identify the cause as a loss of faith and Christian ideals.

Certainly, capitulation to the forces of consumerism and cynicism is something to be avoided. But perhaps the changes are basically good and the deepest cause is something quite other. It seems to me that the deepest root of "new" Catholic thinking and life is more accurate knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth in his earthly existence and of how he now is and works as the risen one.

All too often in the past, the picture of Jesus was distorted to legitimize questionable developments in the church. All too often Christ's continuing presence to the church was overlooked and certain structures or agents were thought necessary to bridge the supposed gap between earth and heaven.

With modern methods of historical research, we now know better what Jesus was really like and how Christianity actually came into existence. Developments in New Testament study have helped us rediscover the character of the disciples' Easter experience and the intrinsic nature of Christ's "resurrection." Consequently, every element of present-day Catholic faith and life needs to be examined to see whether and to what extent it is truly faithful to what God did and does in Jesus.

To apply this to the question at hand: There are real questions about the way in which the papacy reflects God's action in Christ as that finds expression in the New Testament writings. Some have focused on the pomp and splendor of the Vatican and contrasted it with the simplicity of life that characterized Jesus himself and early Christians.

There is something to be said for such criticism -- as someone has jokingly observed, "It is hard to imagine

Jesus riding around in a popemobile." The pope is uniquely visible and symbolic in the midst of Christianity, and the papal lifestyle has considerable impact on people's views of the church. However, this kind of criticism can descend to haggling and does not get to the heart of the matter.

A spiritual monarchy

The real issue is monarchical power, whether the monarchy in question be worldly or spiritual. It has proved to be a blessing that the papacy has perforce ceased to be an earthly monarchy. But there remains the question of a spiritual monarchy. At least at first blush, monarchical understanding of the church and of the papacy's role contrasts fundamentally with Jesus of Nazareth. One is faced with clear cognitive dissonance.

In the gospel scene of Jesus' temptation in the desert, one finds a distillation of the forces that work with or against God's reign. Jesus is asked to prove his messiahship by tempting God and employing means of "salvation" other than God's. The culminating temptation comes when Satan offers Jesus ultimate economic and political power, "all the kingdoms of the earth," as the path to saving humankind. Jesus' refusal to bow to this worship of earthly power puts him squarely at odds with our ordinary understanding and esteem of power.

Not surprisingly, Jesus' disciples did not grasp immediately such a radical reversal of their thinking; they are described arguing among themselves as to who would have power when Jesus came into his kingdom. As Matthew 20 tells the story, Jesus attempts to straighten out their thinking by stating that the kind of dominating power commonly exercised by civil monarchs has no place in God's reign.

Instead, the power operative in Jesus' mission as it sacramentalized his Abba's saving action was the mysterious power exercised by the servant of God described in Isaiah 52. In his dying witness to truth and love Jesus exercised the very power, God's Spirit, which produces the "life without end" he thenceforth shares with his human sisters and brothers. The gospels describe Jesus explicitly and without qualification rejecting the political model for the reign of God.

But did Jesus reject once and for all a monarchical model for the church? Careful study of the New Testament writings suggests that Jesus did not use any model for thinking about the church because he did not envisage a future church as a structured religious community. He did not foresee or plan for any ordained officials. Much less did he himself establish the initial form of any institutional structures or rituals.

What he did was to initiate a work of salvation whose nature would lead to certain structures evolving in the course of history. Jesus "instituted the church" by living as he lived, by dying as he did, and by passing into that realized state of humanness that he shares with those who accept it. Jesus exercised power and continues still to exercise that power, the power of God's Spirit of truth and love.

For the papacy, then, as for all structured elements of the church, that raises a critical question: Can we Catholics still maintain that aspects of the church's life such as the papacy are really *de jure divino*, that is, initiated and empowered by God? I believe we can, if we do not separate and contrast *de jure divino* and *de jure humano* (human origin).

If the Christian community in history is truly "body of Christ," animated by God's own Spirit, no activity of the church that faithfully responds to the impulse of that Spirit can be purely *de jure humano*. What comes into being as the church in history is the co-creation of believing Christians and of God.

Called to conversion

The problem, however, is that the institutional church we know did not come purely from the impulse of Christ's Spirit, from the insights and motivations proper to the gospel. The decisions that controlled the way in which the

institutional church emerged were made within a particular culture at a particular point in history; they were made within the perspectives and presumptions of that culture, presumptions and perspectives that may or may not have been consonant with the true nature of Christianity.

At the very least, they were a limitation on the catholicity of Christianity. As a result, in every age we must examine the inherited institutions by which we strive to be Christian, slowly bringing them into greater conformity with the model provided by Jesus' own ministry and with the working of Christ's Spirit in our own world.

We are continually called to corporate conversion -- *ecclesia semper reformanda*. In our day we have a special need to reconsider responsibly and fearlessly the absoluteness with which we have endowed some institutions of the church.

There are indications that Jesus himself had to struggle with much the same question: How permanent were the institutions of Judaism, institutions such as the Law and the Temple ritual? Certainly, he needed to revise radically the popular notion of "Messiah." The kingly overtones of "Messiah" did not fit Jesus' mission. And after his death his immediate disciples faced the same need to reinterpret "Messiah" if it was to be applied to the risen Christ. Luke's gospel in a special way sees Jesus as a prophetic Messiah, not as a monarch but as the presence of a divine wisdom that challenged the political and religious power of his day.

If one probes deeper the forces at work in Jesus' life and mission, the career of Jesus is seen to flow from the saving power of God working in him, the power we identify as God's -- and Christ's -- Spirit. Christian faith sees this power as the creative force of divine love and ultimate truth. In many ways, the very deepest level of Christian faith is belief that truth and love, beginning with God, are capable of overcoming evil and bringing humans to their destiny.

The path to well-being

In the midst of a history marred by exploitation and oppression, it is difficult to have such faith, and all too easy to espouse the ideology that proclaims wealth and might as the path to people's well-being, even as the path to the church's well-being. Certainly, though, the church as a prophetic community needs to resist this temptation and continue Jesus' witness to the true power of God's reign.

So the question must be posed to all Christian institutions, including the papacy: Is the power they exercise the power of God's Spirit or some other forms of power that are not congruent with the action of that Spirit?

Or to pose the question more specifically: Is the political model that has for centuries grounded our understanding of the papacy really applicable to the Christian community? And if it is not, how are we, in a way that is faithful to the person and ongoing mission of Jesus, to think about the role of the bishop of Rome?

Are the domination and control that seem intrinsic to monarchy to play a part in the exercise of the papal role? Are the bishops of the world to carry out their pastoral role under the control of the pope, picked because of their agreement with him, watched over by a Vatican bureaucracy that censors decisions made on a local level -- as happened with the recent policy on inclusive language in liturgy?

Is the pope's own interpretation of Christianity to be the model that provides uniformity of belief and practice for a worldwide church that embraces faithful of very diverse cultures? To put it more bluntly, is it the role of the pope to shape the church according to his own image and likeness?

On the other hand, is the appropriate attitude of other Catholics, especially those who, like bishops, occupy a position of responsibility in the church, to be one of unquestioning submission to the Vatican or rather one of

respectful and honest but also maturely critical listening to and learning from the pope's witness to faith?

Why, for instance, should pastoral decisions that are made with great care by the hierarchy of the United States, decisions that reflect the committed faith and discipleship and needs of millions of Catholics, require approval by Rome? Or to address an issue that underlies much of the present power relationship between pope and bishops: Is appointment of the world's bishops a prerogative intrinsic to the papacy?

These are not specious questions that lead to immediate and easy reply, for there are reflective and sincerely devoted Catholics who respond positively and others whose answer is negative. But these questions cannot be avoided if true unity, which is quite different from homogeneity, is to characterize the Christianity of the future, a Christianity that sacramentalizes the saving presence of the risen Christ.

*Bernard Cooke teaches theology at Incarnate Word College in San Antonio, Texas. His most recent book is *God's Beloved* (Trinity Press).*

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