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Winds of change bring a 'paradigm shift'; now faithful must speak up

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People in the United States and specifically in religious groups in the country are deeply divided in their worldview, goals and values. Everything points to the fact that the gap is increasing rather than being healed. As throughout its history, the Catholic church reflects the society from which its membership is drawn. It has become common parlance to speak of "liberal" and "conservative" Catholics, of "left wing" and "right wing." Somewhat whimsically, a recent study of U.S. Catholics who espouse more reactionary views is titled "Being Right."

One of the things we most need for productive conversation is a structure of open public discussion of fundamental issues. There is plenty of discussion on both sides, but there are few opportunities for nonpolemical exchange. To help avoid unnecessary confrontations between theologians and canon law societies of the country along with the bishops devised some years ago a pattern for responsible resolution of differences. Nothing like this exists for the bulk of thinking adult Catholics, thought groups like the Association for Rights of Catholics in the Church have long urged it. This lack is especially felt by people in this country, accustomed as they are to legal rights of appeal.

For better or worse, then, we need to advance a calm discussion of the very important issues about which people with opposing views feel deeply. Here and there and on a small scale, such mature conversation is taking place, but it must be extended so that it is not drowned out by the noise of partisan shouting

In Isaiah 1:18, God through the prophet invites the straying people, "Come, let us reason together." The text is one that would seem to have obvious application to the tragic situation in the Lincoln, Neb., diocese, where Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz has decreed a mass excommunication of Catholics belonging to a dozen groups, including the church reform group Call to Action. However, even if the conflict between the bishop and some of the most Christian people in the diocese is not resolved in the near future by "reasoning together" -- and present indications are not too promising -- the Lincoln case may be for all of us a privileged teachable moment.

The issues underlying the conflict in Lincoln are not peculiar to that diocese; they are issues that all those concerned about the future of the church need to deal with openly and candidly.

However, the unhappy conflict in Lincoln may move us to decide that recognizing the left/right division is not sufficient; the time has come to start to heal it.

On each side we need to avoid stereotyping those who disagree with us; we need to take for granted the fundamental good faith of others; we need to lean together rather than win a debate. For one thing, we must take account of what today is termed a person's "social location," that is, the ethnic background, economic situation, educational formation, age and experience, the factors that condition the way people interpret the world around

them. People with different social locations see "reality" quite differently

Covenant offers a model

Proof that irenic steps can be taken, steps urging that the widening division in U.S. society and among U.S. Catholics be admitted and initiatives taken to heal it, was the "Covenant for Renewal" document that emerged last winter from two years of meetings organized by the National Center for Pastoral Leadership under Timothy Ragan's guidance. It proposed a vision for the future of U.S. Catholicism that attempted to bypass the dichotomies that threaten the unity of the church in this country. Yet, even this statement, produced by a cross section of Catholic leadership, represents only one view of the issues that were addressed. While it should be complemented by a much wider conversation, the statement provides a platform for such a conversation and the hope that it could take place.

Another source of hope was the procedure used by the bishops in preparing the pastoral letter on the economy: a series of hearings across the country that provided an opportunity for a wide exchange of views. Unfortunately, this model has yet to be used in discussions about the church itself.

Understanding what is really happening in today's world and today's church is essential for an honest, humble exchange of deeply held convictions.

Change of immense proportions is taking place, change that all of us together need to deal with creatively and fearlessly. In Catholic discussion about change in the church, there is a tendency to focus on what occurred in the Second Vatican Council as if change began there. For the most part, however, that council merely fitted partially into and reflected the process of change that was already under way. Appeal to Vatican II by either progressives or conservatives to justify their views may, in some instances, be helpful, but seldom are such appeals conclusive, because the documents produced by the bishops are compromise documents.

Within the context of official Catholic pronouncements of the 20th century, especially on doctrinal matters during the modernist controversies, some of Vatican II sounds groundbreaking, but it was not at the cutting edge of current religious thinking. To say that is not to criticize the council. Had it made only cutting-edge statements, it would not have been pastorally responsible, for it would not have been "conservative" in the best sense of that term, and it would not have provided guidance for the vast bulk of Catholics whose theological understandings were certainly not on the cutting edge. Vatican II was incredibly important, for it turned the Catholic church around, somewhat reluctantly on official levels, to face the modern world; it made progressive thinking acceptable, though it stopped short of endorsing it; it acknowledged the real questions that Christian faith needs to face. It was a big step in the right direction, but only a first step into the future.

Basic cultural shifts

The more fundamental change affecting the church as an institution and the people within the church is the cultural shift occurring throughout humanity today. Students of this change are using terms like "a basic paradigm shift" or "a worldwide sociocultural revolution." They are referring to the underlying "shape" of time and space in people's perception of reality and the fact that that shape has not only changed, it has become fluid. The implicit image of society as a settled, divinely appointed, up-and-down hierarchical arrangement, with superior and powerful monarchs ruling those lower down and powerless, is being replaced by the horizontal imagery of "community." Probably the most evident and most important manifestation of this shift is what is occurring among women of the world today. The U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, made this unavoidably clear.

So in this context, what happens to the model of a "hierarchical church"? Is it accidental that the word communio emerged in Vatican II as probably the most important designation of the church? Is it also accidental

that since the council that term has been the object of controversy at the periodic synods of the world's Catholic bishops? What happens to notions like "hierarchy" or "monarchical episcopate," a modeling of the Christian community that we took for granted in our education about the church? Nor is it accidental that the role and status of women in the church is right now the focus of division among Catholics and the constant object of papal statements.

People's notion of time is also changing. Things change so fast today that we are constantly readjusting. Leisurely reflection has given way to rapid succession of TV sound bites. Those of us who teach find in most incoming students not only a lack of historical knowledge but almost a disdain for what what happened more than 48 hours earlier.

What does this imply for a community of religious believers who cherish tradition, who have always believed that a definable deposit of truth was to be handed on from one generation to another? "Process" and "evolution" characterize modern thought's model of reality, but as late as the encyclical Humani Generis in 1950, official Catholic teaching opposed the idea of evolution. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was exiled from Europe for his attempts to integrate evolutionary thinking with Christian faith.

Perhaps the most frightening aspect of this shift -- frightening at least for those who have seen the church as the bastion of permanence -- is the realization that there are probably no absolutes short of God. That is not really news. The Bible was explicit about it, but we had come to endow a great number of our cultural structures and arrangements, particularly our Euro-American arrangements, with a permanence and universality they didn't deserve. We didn't see them as strictly divine, but we did claim that some of them were directly intended and instituted by God.

Resolving continuity and discontinuity is always an issue for a society as history unfolds. Today that resolution is immensely difficult, almost impossible, and certainly filled with peril. How much of the human cultural and religious treasure of the past will we retain or perhaps lose? On the other hand, in the effort not to lose that heritage, how many of the opportunities for creative advance will we ignore? Clearly a major fault line between progressives and reactionaries exists in Catholicism and in society in general. But need it be an either-or? The history of Catholic theology in this century would seem to say no to that question. Many of our more creative and influential thinkers like Karl Rahner or Henri De Lubac or Yves Congar were pioneering students of Christian tradition who came to their "innovative" insights precisely through their study of tradition.

What's 'a good Catholic'?

In the midst of all this, what does it mean to be "a good Catholic"? What does it mean to form our conscience, individually and corporately? How does one come closer to Christ and "grow in grace"? Very simply, what is a mature thinking Catholic supposed to do?

On the individual level, the goal in life remains essentially the same as it has always been -- to be honest and loving, to try to live out an open and dedicated relationship to the risen Christ and, through him, to God, to care responsibly for those around one, and by doing this to attain one's destiny with God in the life beyond death. But the understanding of what this means concretely and how to go about it is changing fundamentally. We are now more aware that faith and grace are life processes, the very heart of that life process we call "maturation." They are not something we have; they are what we are. God expects us to grow up -- that has been the message of revelation from at least as far back as Jeremiah. We are meant to be decisive and self-determining. We are meant to develop a distinctive self-identity. We cannot be blessed by God for handing over to others in blind submission those choices that are demanded by the circumstances of our lives. More radically, even God cannot substitute for what I must do, precisely because grace is life. I must become a mature lover, I must become free, I must discover the truth of myself and of the world around me.

We are realizing that our human freedom is not simply a presupposition for moral choices, good moral choices that then win the reward of eternal life. Freedom, genuine responsible freedom, is the ultimate goal of our personal becoming. Particular actions or attitudes are immoral because they destroy or block the development of that freedom. Already in the early Mosaic traditions of the Bible, God's saving action is seen precisely as leading humans to freedom.

What that implies is that the structures of the church, along with its teaching and liturgy, exist in order to aid Christians in this journey to freedom. It implies also that such a journey can be undertaken only if the life of the Christian community provides the context, guidance and support for people's growth to maturity.

Central to a life of mature faith and grace is the search for truth. Jesus' own words, "The truth will make you free," must be taken seriously. No more basic moral imperative exists in Christianity than the obligation of searching for the truth, acknowledging it no matter what the cost and remaining faithful to its demands. But here we encounter one of the major shifts in Catholic teaching over the past couple of centuries. For a long time, it had been assumed -- at least in the teaching from official circles -- that God had directly endowed higher church officials with all the truths needed for salvation, that they in turn were meant to communicate those truths authoritatively to the rest of the church, and that consequently the bulk of believers would attain the truth about God and human life by simply accepting what they were told by the ordained bishops and presbyters. Without for the moment saying yes or no to this view, it clearly comes into conflict with the fundamental approach that characterizes modern thought, namely that the truth must be attained through a careful process of discovery.

Scholars and Rome

To a considerable extent, the official levels of the church still cling to the older view of "truth coming down from above" and only hesitatingly agree that some of the applications of modern critical ways of seeking truth are acceptable. Responsible Catholic scholars, however, have carefully used the critical methods of "science" to clarify and deepen knowledge about the basic elements of Christian belief.

The result has often been a tension between the highest church authorities in Rome and the best of Catholic scholarship. Vatican II vindicated theological thought condemned 20 years earlier by a papal encyclical, and biblical scholars are freer now than they have ever been in this century, but the effort of church officials to control thinking other than their own still continues.

Both groups have the responsibility to seek and defend what is true; in any dispute it should always be assumed that this is what both sides are honestly trying to do. But it must be said clearly that the most basic obligation of thinking Catholics -- and not just professional scholars -- in the church is to be faithful to the truth. For better or worse, some knowledge of this struggle between two views of truth-seeking has trickled down to the bulk of Catholics and created some confusion, not just about the matters being discussed but about the extent to which they should follow one or the other view. It has not helped matters that people get much of their information from superficial reports about scholarly discussions -- like the Time magazine article on the "Jesus seminar." Unfortunately the article did not indicate that the seminar's methodology is far from achieving universal acceptance by scholars and that much of the work of that group has been rehashing issues worked through decades ago.

Another way of saying this is to insist that each Christian -- as a matter of fact, each human -- must develop and follow his or her own mature conscience. It is only within a community of faith that such a mature Christian conscience -- the ability to respond in truly Christian fashion to the situations of life -- can develop. To form and follow such an adult conscience is much more complicated than simply doing what one is told to do; in some circumstances it can mean going against what one is told to do.

Conscience formation cannot happen in isolation from other persons. The process is the same as socialization, coming to adulthood within a particular web of relationships and acquiring responsibility for those relationships. Adult Christians cannot dismiss their responsibility for the world in which they live. Vatican II reiterates undeniably that this responsibility is demanded by the discipleship all receive with baptism. Whether a given set of circumstances involves the community one encounters in one's immediate life situation, or the community of persons throughout the world, or the community of believers that is the church, a mature Christian cannot responsibly dismiss the demands of those circumstances. Authoritative church teaching can give helpful guidance as Catholics try to make appropriate conscience judgments. Papal social teaching during the past century has provided just such guidance in the face of strong opposing ideology. But official teaching cannot dispense a person from making his or her own decision in a particular situation of moral choice.

How then is an adult Catholic to assess the teaching authority of church officials, especially the authority of the pope? How is he or she bound to agree with the specifics of judgments about matters such as contraception? Is there dissent from papal or episcopal statements that is grounded in loyalty to the truth and to the people who are the church, dissent that may be a dictate of mature and correctly formed conscience? Obviously any response to these questions must be careful; it must take account of the reasons others in the church will disagree; it must try to be honest but thoroughly frank and straightforward. Straightforward confrontation need not be hostile confrontation.

Authority's character

Certainly the bishops have special teaching authority and, in a distinctive way within the episcopal college, the pope. This authority has a specific character, specific grounds and specific limits. These are tied to the perennial role of the episcopacy in the church. At the beginning of Christianity, the role proper to the Twelve Apostles was to be the privileged witnesses to the mystery and the historical reality of Jesus' life and death and of their experience of him risen. This was why the criterion of orthodoxy for both canonical scriptures and liturgy was "apostolicity."

The Twelve witnessed to the fact that there was a Jesus of Nazareth, but they witnessed also to the manner in which he provided by his teaching and his activity a model of what it means to be authentically and fully human. Their witness passed into the gospels and provided what Christianity has always considered the guide for ideal human behavior. For 2,000 years the norm for Christian life has been "the imitation of Christ," and while this imitation has received any number of differing interpretations, the touchstone of their accuracy remains always the New Testament witness of the Twelve.

It is this function of ultimate witness that is inherited generation after generation by those accepted into the episcopal college through ordination. All doctrine, all catechesis, all theology is grounded in this collegial witness, for if the Christ to whom the bishops attest did not exist, if the life and death and resurrection of Jesus did not happen, if the words and deeds of Jesus are only an invention of a later generation, there is no gospel to preach or to explain theologically.

When, however, discussion about teaching authority goes beyond episcopal witness to the central faith mystery of Christ and to truths immediately related to it (such as the divine institution of the Christian community through the guiding gift of Christ's Spirit), and extends into the area of theological explanation of this mystery, the picture becomes a bit murky. Recognizing that each situation in which church officials make statements about faith and morals should be carefully assessed with respect to its exact function as witness or as explanation, it must still be said that when bishops or the pope are acting as theologians, their authority is subject to the same judgment as all theological teaching.

Those who teach theology have authority as teachers in proportion to their knowledge. This is nothing new. In

the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas fought for the principle that those who possess knowledge have both the right and the responsibility to teach, even if they are not church officials. The obverse is also true: One without knowledge cannot claim authority as a teacher. Occupying an official position does not confer knowledge, nor can one use office as a claim to knowledge. Episcopal ordination includes the ordinand in the collegial witness to Christ, which is the heart of Christian theology, but ordination does not confer infused knowledge. As a man leaves the church building after his episcopal ordination, he knows no more than when he entered the building.

This is not to deny that many bishops can and do teach with theological understanding and therefore with teaching authority, because of the theological expertise they have gained from study and reflection. When they do teach theologically they are subject, as are all theologians, to the methodologies proper to theology as a discipline of knowledge and so subject to examination and even criticism by other theological experts. Admittedly, it is not easy to draw clearly the line between bishops teaching as bishops and bishops teaching as theologians, which confirms the need for much more open public discourse in the life of the church, discourse that should reach well beyond bishops and professional theologians and include thousands of dedicated Catholics whose insightful faith experience is itself a "word of God" to which bishops and theologians alike must listen.

What about obedience?

But are not the faithful to be obedient to the voice of their shepherds? Yes, if one understands accurately what obedience truly is. In its most fundamental sense, obedience is sincere response to the reality we encounter in our lives. Obedience in other words is indistinguishable from real maturity. Part of that reality we encounter are the human communities in which we live, communities that deserve that name only if they are characterized by one or another form of order. In large and more highly organized communities, establishment of order is more complicated and usually requires that a relatively few direct, and most are directed. So part of responding to reality, that is, being obedient, is to recognize and honor the direction of those in charge when they are legitimately exercising the governing authority they possess.

In the Catholic church this means that obedience is responding positively and maturely to any legitimate exercise of governing authority. But suppose a case where a church official is acting, not by true authority but by use of power, ruling not by reasoned understanding but by manipulation or instilling fear. One may make a mature decision to go along with this for some motive like wishing to avoid further division in the community; this is an act of love and concern, but it is not obedience. Or one may go along with the unjustified order out of fear; this may be submission, but it is not obedience. Of course, one may also make the mature and virtuous decision, out of love for the church, that one cannot in conscience conform to an abuse of power.

Catholics certainly would not be bound to submit to everything decreed by church officials no matter if a particular decree was accompanied by an illegitimate claim to authority. Fortunately, most Catholics will rarely or never encounter situations where they have to make such decisions, but it is important to understand the nature and limits of authority in the church and to understand accurately the relationship all of us have to those in official position. This is all the more important today when the number of ordained declines and laity are increasingly involved in exercising authoritative direction.

These are times of tension and unfortunately times of pain for many sincere and dedicated Catholics -- much of the pain unnecessary. The situation in Lincoln does not have to be. This is also a time for growth into maturity, a time for learning and unlearning, a time for speaking humbly and honestly and listening openly to one another. It could then become a time of peace rather than division. If God could invite peoples to "come, let us reason together," can we do less with one another?

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