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Changing a feudal church

by Thomas Groome

AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING: THE COMING DEMOCRATIZATION OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

By Robert McClory

Crossroad, 240 pages, \$19.95

As It Was in the Beginning is a prophetic work. The author is hopeful, present evidence to the contrary, that the democratization of the Catholic church must surely come, like the triumph of truth, no matter how delayed.

Mr. McClory is certainly not naive about the challenges. He sees the Catholic church as “the last deeply rooted feudal system in the Western world.” And yet he is fully confident that the original vision of an inclusive and participative community of all the baptized “presses on to fulfillment.” He is consoled that “fierce resistance to change is often the last hurrah of a faltering regime.”

A fine journalist, Mr. McClory doesn’t pretend to be a theologian or church historian. He has read the scholars, albeit selectively, and mounts his argument from scholarly resources. They convince him that Pope Pius X’s infamous statement that the laity “are to be led like a docile flock by their pastors” was an aberration, though a long-standing one, to what should be the *modus operandi* of the church.

The foundations of Christian faith, especially its theology of baptism, call us to function as a participative democracy instead.

In reviewing “The Past,” the first six chapters of his book, Mr. McClory finds warrant for ecclesial democratization in the inclusivity and empowerment of people reflected in Jesus’ public ministry and in the egalitarian spirit of the first Christian communities. He raises up episcopal and papal models like Cyprian of Carthage (died 258) and Pope Gregory I (died 604); both championed a “non-monarchical”

approach to church leadership and insisted on consulting the laity because “what touches all must be approved by all.” The author points to times when the very orthodox faith of the church was saved by its *sensus fidelium* -- sense of the faithful -- as in the Christological controversies when its leaders looked as if they would default.

Alas, the monarchical structure came to prevail -- and still does -- with lots of champions. The author cites Pope Gregory VII, who died in 1085, and Pope Innocent III, who died in 1216. The latter summarized that the pope is “lower than God but higher than man, judging all and judged by no one.” Yet though the church embraced what the author terms “a monarchical feudal system of governance,” he finds resistance in the conciliarist movement and its insistence “that authority resides in the whole body of the church, not exclusively in its papal head.”

To support his argument from “The Present,” which occupies Chapters 7 to 12 of the book, Mr. McClory places front and center the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and can cite copious quotable quotes. In many ways the council’s whole agenda was to reclaim a radical theology of baptism -- as if it must be taken seriously by individual Christians and their communities. However, the council’s vision for the laity having their say has not been realized -- yet -- but is mired in a mighty struggle between “progress and backlash.”

Mr. McClory believes that we are in a new moment, prompted mainly by a “convergence of crises,” the clergy sex abuse scandal leading the way. This gives him hope for “the collapse of the [church’s] feudal system” and its democratization instead. He finds signs of hope both “from above” (for example, the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences) and “from below” (for example, lay movements such as Voice of the Faithful).

In Chapter 13, imagining “The Future,” Mr. McClory offers some scenarios for how democracy will gradually emerge in the church. I found this to be the weakest section with little by way of real strategies to get there from here. But perhaps such practicalities are not the strong suit of prophets.

I was surprised that the author does not make more of the image of church as the body of Christ; to me this is ever the defining vision for how the church should function. He never lays out how real democracy in the church might work and yet retain the Petrine and episcopal offices that are central to Catholicism. And, of course, one could take a counter position to his and find the quotes to support it. Yet I don’t know how anyone could argue convincingly from the Gospels for a monarchical feudal system. In fact, Jesus warned disciples at least six different times, one way or another, that they were not to “lord it over” their people; they should function as servant leaders instead.

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Whether you agree or disagree with Mr. McClory or assign him to the wishful thinking category, *As It Was in the Beginning* is an exhilarating read. The writing is what one would expect from a veteran journalist, an engaging narrative that reads like a novel. It renewed in me the élan of those heady days in the aftermath of Vatican II when we really thought we were about to “cross the Jordan” on many issues that cry out for reform and renewal. Mr. McClory also brought me back to Paul’s counsel that hope is most a virtue when “evidence” for it is in short supply (Romans 8:24).

Thomas Groome is professor of theology and religious education at Boston College and currently serves as director of its Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry. His most recent book is What Makes Us Catholic: Eight Gifts for Life.

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