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Of Bishops and Priests

Eugene Duffy

Recent contributions to *The Furrow* have drawn attention to the fact that serious problems are beginning to develop in the priest-bishop relationship as a result of how the child sexual abuse crisis has been handled. There is a real danger that this strained relationship might take root and become a defining feature of how priests and bishops relate to one another. If such were to happen it would be to go against the tradition of the Church which has always seen priest and bishop as the closest of co-operators in the service of God's people.

Here it will be argued that whatever the reality as experienced by priests today, collegiality, or the sharing of ministry and responsibility between priests and bishops, is in fact deeply rooted in the life of the Church and especially prominent in the early centuries. This teaching and experience of the early Church is deliberately taken up by Vatican II in several of its key documents with a view to enriching the understanding and practice of governance at the local level. This is a dimension of the conciliar teaching that seems to have been lost over the decades, but if appreciated and implemented it may go some way towards dealing with some of the serious difficulties experienced by many priests today; it may encourage them to work more co-operatively among themselves; it may also help to alleviate some of the tensions that exist today between priests and their bishops because of how some priests perceive and experience the exercise of episcopal authority.

Vatican II was committed to collegiality and co-responsibility in the Church at many levels. Since then episcopal collegiality has developed significantly, even to the extent that some priests consider it to be at the expense of a collegiality that should be more obvious at diocesan level. There may be a truth in this to the extent that the bishops are called upon to expend so much of their time on the work of the conference and its commissions that they

Eugene Duffy is a priest of the diocese of Achonry. Address: Western Theological Institute, 16 University Road, Galway.

have less time left for diocesan consultations and collaboration. At the parochial level, emphasis has been placed on the development of parish pastoral councils thus ensuring greater co-responsibility among priests and parishioners in the leadership of their local communities. While episcopal collegiality and parochial co-responsibility are both of vital importance to the life of the Church and need to be constantly fostered, it seems opportune at this point to give some serious attention to the question of presbyteral collegiality in order to balance the various organs of governance in the Church and to address the confusion of role and isolation experienced by many priests in their parishes. This is not to imply that the other dimensions of co-responsibility are of less importance; it is simply to address one issue in a more focused fashion.

While many voices call for accountability in the Church, especially from those vested with roles of leadership, there is the danger that the Church's own rich tradition in this regard may be overlooked and structures put in place that do not do full justice to this valuable resource which is at our disposal. Here a basic outline of that tradition of co-responsibility will be attempted, simply as a reminder that our theological heritage carries important values that can help us to address some of our contemporary challenges.

CO-RESPONSIBILITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

When we read the Acts of the Apostles and the Pastoral Letters in the New Testament we get a genuine sense of leadership being exercised in a collaborative or collegial fashion. The early Jewish Christians were familiar with this style of governance from their own tradition with its groups of elders or presbyters guiding the affairs of the community. So in the Acts of the Apostles we find the elders mentioned next to the apostles at the Council of Jerusalem, suggesting that they had a key role in the leadership of the Christian community. On Paul's last visit to Jerusalem the presbyters are closely associated with James. Luke says, 'When we reached Jerusalem the brothers welcomed us warmly. The next day, Paul accompanied us on a visit to James, and all the presbyters were present' (Acts 21:17-18). James appears as the leader of the Jerusalem community and the presbyters as his council. The prominence given to this collegial group in the Jerusalem community is noteworthy because it occurs in association with the only example of a residential Church leader in the whole of the New Testament.

As the original Apostles depart the scene there are fresh problems with the appearance of false prophets and teachers. The solution is the regularization of Church order and for this presbyters or elders are to be appointed in every town and they are to have

the function of overseer or supervisor. Their tasks will include 'checking the religious and ethical behaviour of community members, caring for the needy out of common goods, and above all ensuring sound doctrine'. They are to hold on to what they have received (Tit. 1:5-9) and correct false teachers.

The New Testament speaks only once of a college of presbyters where Timothy is warned not to neglect the grace of God which is in him and which was given him through 'the laying-on of the hands of the presbytery' (1 Tim 4:14). John P. Meier's interpretation of what happened to Timothy was that 'Paul ordained [him] personally by imposition of hands (2 Tim 1:6); but in this he acted as presiding officer and was accompanied by the whole body of presbyters, who also imposed hands.'¹ This could be interpreted as Paul acting as head of a college of presbyters. In any case, a college of elders plays a significant role in the commissioning of Timothy for his missionary task.

The First Letter of Peter also points to a presbyteral style of leadership in the Church at Rome and in the communities of northern Asia Minor, to which it is addressed. The author describes himself as a 'fellow presbyter' and appeals 'to the elders of your community' to tend the flock whose shepherds they are (1 Peter 5:1-5). It is possible that these communities he was addressing were originally evangelized from Jerusalem and that the collegial structure operative there was adopted by these new foundations. Once again, it points to an extensive presbyteral style of leadership in the early Church.

It is significant that in the discussion of the role of the presbyters in the New Testament there is no mention made of liturgical presidency. The primary emphasis is on teaching and proclamation of the word of God and secondarily on the right ordering or leadership of the communities over which they preside.² The only indicator of a specifically liturgical role for the presbyters is in James 5:14-15, where they are to be called upon to pray for and anoint the sick. It can only be presumed that they may have also presided at the Eucharist, but the New Testament never explicitly states who fulfilled this role in the communities.

LATER WRITINGS

In the writings of the second century, such as those of Ignatius of Antioch, Clement of Rome, Polycarp and others, the language and practice of collegial leadership continues to be significant. Even Ignatius, who is associated with giving prominence to the role of

1. 'Presbyteros in the Pastoral Epistles', 340.

2. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (London: Chapman, 1984), 34.

the bishop, still speaks of the elders or presbyters acting in unison with their bishop. The close bonds of unity that exist between the bishop and his presbyters are vital to the unity and communion of life to which all the members of the community are called. There is a genuine sense of collaboration and partnership among those who are called to the ministry of leadership and governance.

The earliest liturgical texts, too, point in the same direction, providing further evidence for the collegiate nature of the presbyterate around its bishop. Presbyters are present at the ordination of the bishop, even though they do not impose hands, and after the ordination they take their place around him at the Eucharist. This indicates that they share a priestly ministry with him and that they have a collegial relationship with him. The rite of ordination for a presbyter points to the corporate presbyterate which is viewed as a governing and teaching body in the Church.

It was only when Christianity moved beyond the confines of the city and became a widespread phenomenon throughout the Mediterranean region that the original presbyters began to replace the bishop as his delegate in the far-flung regions of his territory, after which time they are also referred to as priests. Although the more obvious close bonds that had previously existed became less obvious and less effective, reminders of their importance remained in place. No Christian initiation was complete without the intervention of the bishop, either performing the final anointing with chrism or supplying the chrism to be used. The sending of the fermentum from the bishop's altar to those of other communities being led by a presbyter kept a link with the episcopal Eucharist.³

There is a significant body of documentary evidence to show that popes and councils from the fourth century up to the High Middle Ages mandated bishops to take counsel from their clergy and not to act without their advice and consent. For example, in 603 Gregory the Great advised the bishop of Corinth not to be too hasty in acting ruthlessly against the members of his own clergy. He counselled that, if a priest is accused or suspected of an offence, the bishop is to call together his senior clergy and in their presence conduct an enquiry after which he can eventually pronounce a canonical sentence. Bishops are regularly reminded that they may not alienate Church property without the consent of their clergy. When cathedral chapters become well established in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries they provide a means by which the senior clergy of a diocese exercise considerable influence in the structures of governance

3. Dom B. Botte, 'Collegiate Character of the Presbyterate and Episcopate', in R. Rouquette, S.J. (ed.), *The Sacrament of Holy Orders: Some Papers and Discussions concerning Holy Orders at a Session of the Centre de Pastorale Liturgique* (London: Aquin, 1955), 81.

and they have a key role in the appointment of a bishop to their diocese. Their powers were not really curtailed until the Council of Trent, which reasserted the prerogatives of the bishop.

DISINTEGRATION OF DIOCESAN COLLEGIALITY

Although some vestiges of presbyteral collegiality survived well into the Middle Ages, its earlier vibrancy was lost due to several factors. Among these was the spread of Christianity from the cities to the rural areas, thus isolating the priest from the bishop and the rest of the presbyterate. In some instances the clergy were more attached to their noble benefactors than to their bishops. A theology of the priesthood gradually developed in the Middle Ages which linked it to the Eucharist in such an exclusive way that other dimensions of the priestly ministry were obscured. This had also the effect of reducing the sacramental significance of the episcopal ministry and its role in the Church. The eventual outcome of this theology was to make the ordained ministry more individualistic, focusing on the priest celebrating the Eucharist. It also diminished the relational dimensions of priestly and episcopal ministry and obscured the connection between the roles of sanctifying, teaching and governing. It was the task of Vatican II to attempt to redress the balance between these and to recover the collegial nature of ecclesial governance.

VATICAN II ON COLLABORATION BETWEEN BISHOPS AND PRIESTS

The very first document issued at Vatican II, *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, speaks of the close bond between the bishop and his presbyterate as they gather around the altar for the celebration of the Eucharist.

[The faithful] must be convinced that the principal manifestation of the Church consists in the full, active participation of all God's holy people in the same liturgical celebrations, especially in the same Eucharist, in one prayer, at one altar, at which the bishop presides, surrounded by his priests and ministers.⁴

This text is significant in that it takes us back to the writings of Ignatius of Antioch, indicating a desire on the part of the Council to retrieve an early understanding of the relationship between the bishop and his priests and to reorder ministerial relationships accordingly. It also indicates a desire to relocate collaboration between priests and bishops in the context of the bonds of communion created by the Eucharist.⁵

4. S.C., 41.

5. Cf. Paul McPartlan, 'Presbyteral Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church', *Ecclesiology* 1 (2006), 16.

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church re-echoes the teaching of the document on the liturgy when it speaks of the bonds of communion and affection that are to exist between the body of priests and the bishop.⁶ The priests 'share in the priesthood and mission of the bishop'. They are 'to see in him a true father' and the bishop is to treat his presbyters as 'his helpers, as his sons and friends'. Among themselves 'priests are united together by bonds of intimate brotherhood ... through the medium of reunions and community life, work and fraternal charity'. Priests are also called 'to unite their efforts and combine their resources under the leadership of their bishops'.⁷ It is significant that five of the footnotes to this article refer to either St Cyprian or St Ignatius of Antioch, once again indicating a desire to reclaim something of the experience and practice of the early Church.⁸

In *The Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church* a diocese is described as 'a section of the People of God entrusted to a bishop to be guided by him with the assistance of his clergy'.⁹ The priests are placed alongside the bishop in the task of preaching, building up the unity of the community, and celebrating the Eucharist. Later, priests are called 'prudent co-operators with the episcopal order',¹⁰ and are said to 'assume a part of the bishop's duties and concerns'. Therefore the bishop should treat them 'with particular affection' and 'regard them as sons and friends'.¹¹ In discussing the spirit of collaboration that is to exist between the presbyters and the bishop, the Decree says: 'to ensure an increasingly effective apostolate, the bishop should be willing to engage in dialogue with his priests, individually and collectively, not merely occasionally, but if possible, regularly. Furthermore, the diocesan priests should be united among themselves and should be genuinely zealous for the spiritual welfare of the whole diocese.'¹² This is the language of collaboration, collegiality and co-responsibility of bishops with their priests and of priests among themselves.

A fourth conciliar document, *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, deals most explicitly with the bishop-priest relationship. Priests are consistently described as co-workers of the bishop,¹³ their brothers and friends.¹⁴ They form one body in the

6. L.G., 28.

7. This sentiment is reaffirmed in *Gaudium et spes*, 43.

8. Cf. L.G., 41.

9. C.D., 11.

10. C.D., 15.

11. C.D., 16; similar sentiments are expressed again in art. 28.

12. C.D., 28.

13. P.O., 4 and 5. Similarly, in *Ad gentes* the priests are described as 'loyal fellow workers' of the bishops (art. 16) and later as their 'collaborators' (art. 39).

14. *Ibid.*, 7.

diocese to which they are attached under their own bishop.¹⁵ The Decree stresses the unity that exists between the bishop and his presbyterate and grounds its teaching in the earliest liturgical documents of the Church.

Bishops, therefore, because of the gift of the Holy Spirit that has been given to priests at their ordination, will regard them as their indispensable helpers and advisors in the ministry and in the task of teaching, sanctifying and shepherding the People of God. This has been forcefully emphasized from the earliest ages of the Church by the liturgical documents.¹⁶

It is clear that the Council again wished to associate itself very explicitly with the collegial style of ministry operative in the earliest centuries of the Church's life. It is significant that presbyters are referred to as 'the indispensable helpers and advisors' of the bishop. The implication is that consultation with the priests is required for the good of the Church. While the Decree does not spell out in great detail how this might now be achieved, it does, nevertheless, state that bishops 'should be glad to listen to their priests' views and even consult them and hold conference with them about matters that concern the needs of pastoral work and the good of the diocese'. In order to make this more concrete it recommends that 'a group or senate of priests should be set up in a way suited to present-day needs, and in a form and with rules to be determined by law. This group would represent the body of priests and by their advice could effectively help the bishop in the management of the diocese.'¹⁷ In a footnote to this statement, the Decree notes that the Cathedral Chapter or the diocesan consultors have fulfilled this role in the past, but now these need to be reformed to respond more fittingly to contemporary circumstances.

In all the discussions about priesthood in the conciliar documents the priest is never considered in isolation. He is always located in the context of the presbyterate to which he belongs and this in union with its bishop. Thus the collegial nature of this ministry in the local Church is underlined, its unity guaranteed and sense of co-responsibility re-emphasized. As Paul McPartlan observes, the ancient concept of the presbyterium has been renewed and proposed afresh for today.¹⁸

JOHN PAUL II ON PRIESTLY CO-RESPONSIBILITY

At the beginning of his pontificate, John Paul II said that 'a spirit of collaboration and shared responsibility' characterizes presbyteral

15. *Ibid.*, 8.

16. *Ibid.*, 7.

17. *Ibid.*, 7.

18. 'Presbyteral Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church', 23.

councils, a feature of ecclesial life that mirrored the collegiality that existed among the bishops.¹⁹ Towards the end of his ministry, in the post-Synodal exhortation, *Pastores gregis*, he reaffirmed the same thinking:

The presbyters, and among them parish priests in particular, are therefore the closest co-operators in the Bishop's ministry ... The Bishop will always strive to relate to his priests as a father and brother who loves them, listens to them, welcomes them, corrects them, supports them, seeks their co-operation and, as much as possible, is concerned for their human, spiritual, ministerial and financial well-being.²⁰

The ideal could hardly be better stated.

CONCLUSION

In the light of this rich theological tradition the issue of presbyteral collegiality needs to be revitalized in the life of the Church. Better structures of communication need to be put in place to ensure that the presbyterate of a diocese participates more fully and significantly in the ministries of governance and teaching. Progress has been made through the institution of priests' councils and the college of consultors. However, this progress can often seem very uneven in terms of the operations and effectiveness of these bodies.

Many priests feel wounded and demoralized today. They seem caught between an accented emphasis on the role of the episcopate and the role of the laity. They feel a need to be heard and for a genuine forum where they can discuss honestly with their bishops and one another the major issues that confront them locally, nationally and universally. It is true that when people are invited to participate actively in the decision-making processes they will be more effectively engaged in the carrying out of the decisions. Unless the priests of a diocese have a genuine experience of collegiate co-responsibility for the mission and ministry of their local Church it is unlikely that the priest at the parish level will have much conviction about its merit in his particular situation.

Bishops need their co-workers and most especially as the Church faces so many challenges from the society and culture in which they have to minister. Just as bishops need to dialogue seriously and often with their priests, so priests have to be open and generous in sharing their gifts and energies with their bishops and one another for the good of each and for the building up of the Christian community. Neither group can operate in isolation. Presbyterates need to take seriously their own responsibility for

19. *Redemptor hominis*, # 5.

20. *Pastores gregis*, 45.

working collaboratively among themselves, with their bishops and with their parishioners. In the Irish context as the demographics of the clergy change, priests will be called upon to look beyond the boundaries of the traditional parish and begin to think in terms of clusters of parishes and work collegially and co-responsibly with others in providing an effective ministry for their people. They will have to think much more sharply in terms of their diocesan, rather than their parochial, responsibilities and work with one another, with their bishops and with all the faithful in animating the faith and practice of the local Church.

The bishops are the agents of unity for the Church locally and universally. There is a real danger that bishops, who are a relatively small group, working too much in isolation become the prisoners of their episcopal commissions, vocal interest groups in society or media driven agendas. It is vital to the life of the Church and the effectiveness of their ministry that they will be in real, regular and structured dialogue with their presbyterates.

In this way they will hear the genuine concerns of God's people; they will have a broader consultative base to guide them in their ministry of teaching and governing. In the current socio-political climate, open and extensive dialogue is the only way to ensure that policies and guidelines proposed by higher authority will be heard and heeded. Effective teaching and governance demand collaboration and shared responsibility.

Accountability. It is important that there be clarity about who can be called to account. In principle it is possible to call a whole team to account. But if, as is likely, the situation is one where there has been a breakdown in communication in the team, then the individual members of the team may be 'passing the buck', that is, blaming each other. It may then be difficult to pin down who is really responsible for the failure. So it is useful, perhaps necessary, to have some one person who has a kind of 'residual' or 'fall-back' responsibility and accountability. This is the person with whom, ultimately, 'the buck stops', and who can be called to account for the failure which has occurred or for failing to take some remedial action.

—DONAL DORR, *Spirituality of Leadership* (Dublin: The Columba Press) p. 111