Ecumenism and the Bishop of Rome

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One of the most difficult ecumenical questions remaining to be faced is that of the Bishop of Rome. Pope Paul VI himself said that “the Pope... is the gravest obstacle in the path of ecumenism.”

Nothing more immediately or clearly symbolizes the unity of the Roman Catholic Church throughout the world than this office. The images and symbols connected with the papacy—the tiara and the keys, the dome of St. Peter’s Basilica, the figure of Peter himself, even the name Roman Catholic—all these signals a Church united throughout the world under a chief shepherd.

The Roman Catholic Church is visibly united, in fact, for many Christians, too much so. They see not unity but a crushing uniformity. Yet, Roman Catholics consider the ministry of the Bishop of Rome as that of the Lord to His Church. Thus, Catholics and other Christians remain divided over the origin and meaning of this office. Its place in tomorrow’s Church must still be considered.

The notion that the bishop of Rome continues the ministry of Peter for the whole Church did not become fully explicit until the fifth century with St. Leo the Great (400-461). However, Leo’s expression of papal primacy was a development and explicit conceptualization of earlier traditions and practices. Two traditions, originally separate, lie behind the development of what has come to be called the Petrine ministry.

The first was the development or “trajectory” beyond the New Testament of the New Testament images associated with Peter. As first official witness to the resurrection of Jesus and leadering figure among the apostles, Peter was portrayed as a fisher of men, shepherd, a pastor of the sheep, the rock on whom the Church was to be built.

A second tradition which became jointed to the Petrine tradition was that of the primacy of the Roman Church. From the beginning the church of Rome played a unique, even preeminent role. Partly this was for historical reasons; it could claim two apostles, Peter and Paul, both of whom worked and died in Rome. And partly it was for political reasons; Rome was the capital of the empire.

Focus of unity

As early as 1 Peter (c. 85) and 1 Clement (c. 96) Rome had undertaken the innovation of other churches, in the former case by means of a New Testament letter most probably written from Rome specifically in Peter’s name.

In subsequent centuries, according to the Lutheran-Roman Catholic statement Papal Primacy and the Universal Church, “Rome ‘had intervened in the life of distant churches, took sides in distant theological controversies, consulted by other bishops on a wide variety of doctrinal and moral questions, and sent legates to faraway councils.’”

Thus, Rome came to be regarded as the final court of appeal and a focus of unity for the universal Church. Leo’s claim that “Peter is not only the presiding spirit of this see, but also the primacy of all the bishops” was from a Roman Catholic point of view only one step in a process of doctrinal development which ended rather with Vatican II’s definition of papal infallibility nor Vatican II’s clarification on the bishop’s share in the Church’s high of pastoral office and authority.

With its teaching on the collegial nature of the episcopal office, always in union with its head, Vatican II, in a sense, relativized the role of the pope, correcting Vatican I’s one-sided emphasis on papal primacy at the expense of the episcopacy which was the case in preceding centuries following the Reformation.

Today the importance of the papal primacy or Petrine ministry as a ministry of unity serving the universal Church is increasingly being recognized. The Church in the U.S. Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue have asked the Lutheran churches if they are prepared to join them in affirming “the possibility and desirability of the papal ministry, renewed under the Gospel and committed to Christian freedom, as a large common theme which would include the Luther churches.” Similarly, the “Vatican Statement” of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARICC), after districting in both the ecumenical movement and the aspects of oversight, states the following: “The only See which makes a claim for the primacy and which has exercised and still exercises such episcopacy is the See of Rome, the city where Peter and Paul died. It seems appropriate that in any future union a universal primacy such as has been described should be held by that See.”

As more interest is expressed in the Petrine ministry on the part of new-Catholic Christians, it becomes increasingly necessary for the Roman Catholic Church to develop a more pastoral, irenic collegial style of leadership for the churches of the Anglican Communion presents no obstacle to eventual recognition between that Communion and the Roman Catholic Church.

Without disputing the importance of the papal or episcopal office, the Roman Catholic Church could learn much from these churches with synodal structures of government.

Tension not resolved

Rahner has suggested that in the interests of unity Rome would draw up a list of those powers and prerogatives it could in principle renounce. For example, it is not absolutely necessary that new bishops must always be chosen and that the pope could be chosen locally, though to be in communion with the episcopal college and to share in the apostolic succession it would be necessary to have subsequent papal approval of all sacramental ordinations he bestows.

Similarly one could ask if the terms of clerical celibacy may be determined by Rome alone.

The tension between papal and episcopal authority has yet been resolved but the power of the pope is in no way unlimited. At Vatican II Pope Paul VI has not only adhered but has demonstrated a willingness to cede some authority to the Church. Without it the Church would not be able to respond to the spiritual needs of the modern world.

In the same way, it is not clear that the principle of subsidiarity, making decisions at the lowest possible level, is sufficiently respected. Here again, in the matter of how the Church’s supreme authority is exercised, there is room for considerable change and development.

1. Papal Primacy

Without challenging the principle of the supreme and final authority of the Bishop of Rome, one can argue as does Karl Rahner “that much of what is claimed by the Roman See is as historical-ly acquired powers and rights of the Roman See do not in fact pertain dogmatically to the inalienable essence of the primacy.”

1.4 A More Participatory Style of Decree Making

Roman Catholic teaching assigns to the episcopal office in union with its head, the Bishop of Rome, “supreme and full power over the universal Church.” Each bishop also exercises over his own church power which is “proper, ordinary, and immediate, although its exercise is ultimately regulated by the supreme authority of the Church.”

2. Relations Between Head and Members of the Church

The relation between the head and members of the episcopal college has taken different historical forms, reflecting the social and political forms of different historical periods. After some six centuries in which authority was increasingly centralized in the papacy and understood juridically, the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II has been moving in the direction of a more collegial form of government. Thanks largely to Pope Paul VI’s emphasis on the Synod of Bishops, the structure for a more collegial exercise of the Church’s highest authority is in place, though it is not clear that the synodal form of government is yet functioning in a truly collegial manner.

True collegiality will not be realized until the bishops have more say in the determination of the synod’s agenda.
It would appear that any exercise of magisterial infallibility in the future Church will be both a collegial and a communal undertaking.

Theological Commission rejected his request, replying: “The Roman Pontiff is bound to abide by Revelation itself, the basic structure of the Church, the sacramental definitions of the first councils, etc. It is impossible to list them all.”

4. Infallibility.

The doctrine of infallibility is one of the most complex issues to resolve, though it is not often properly understood by either Protestant or Roman Catholics.

Dogmatically, infallibility is basically a statement about the faith of the whole Church which comes to official expression when a pope or council teaches ex cathedra, “from the chair,” that is, explicitly and with full authority. Infallibility is limited, both in its exercise and in its definitions themselves which are conditioned by the knowledge, concerns, thought categories, and language of any given historical period.

Observations

As Rahner has noted, Protestant Christians “would be prepared to recognize a Petrine office do not feel justified in handing over to the pope a blank check for the future, as it were” in matters of infallibility.

In response to this concern Rahner makes several observations.

First, he states that since it is clear concordant doctrine that ex cathedra infallible definitions do not involve introducing new revelation, it is evident that in order to exercise the teaching function today there is a moral obligation to conduct some sort of inquiry at least among the bishops worldwide.

Second, he suggests that if the pope was, in the future, to exercise this infallible teaching authority, it would probably involve a new expression of the fundamental substance of Christianness, that is, further material differentiation of that substance, as for example, the doctrine of infallibility in Pius XI and Pius XII represented.

If the papal magisterium were to be exercised infallibly, it would probably be used only to defend the faith and to express it in more contemporary language.

Finally he raised the question “whether in the foreseeable future we are able to expect papal ex cathedra definitions at all, or whether for a variety of reasons these are improbable?”

However, one chooses to answer this question, it would appear that any ex cathedra magisterial infallibility in the Church of the future will be both a collegial and a communal undertaking.

Tomorrow’s Church will be both more pluralistic and more truly integral than the Church today. In such a Church, representing a true community of peoples in a deeply divided world, the ministry of one who will serve and symbolize the unity of the Church universal will be especially important. This ministry already exists in the office of the Bishop of Rome.

Removed in the light of the Gospel and sensitive to the concerns of all Christians, it will be one of Catholicism’s most significant contributions to the Church of tomorrow.

( Ibid., p. 223.)

I.

Jesus responds to the question of the meaning of human existence by a moral urgency and doctrine. The first words, pronounced by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, are the beatitudes. There the meaning of life (“happiness”) is presented as tied to a series of ethical demands. Voluntary poverty, goodness, purity of heart, forgiveness, etc. The texts which follow also propose norms of an ethical nature: A greater justice than that of the ancient law.

This “new” justice (or new moral law) proposed by Jesus is one of an absolute nature which makes absolute demands. It is presented as a demand with no compromise: “You have heard it said... but I say to you...”

Essential object

What the law of Jesus adds to the ancient law is precisely the character of the Absolute whose universality is demanded. Love your enemies, do not serve two masters, sell all that you have and give to the poor, give one’s life for those one loves.

This moral law has as its essential object to establish an absolute meaning in which humanity, death can become a means, it introduces new revelation, it is evident that in order to exercise the teaching function today there is a moral obligation to conduct some sort of inquiry at least among the bishops worldwide.

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