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Ecumenism Today and the Bishop of Rome

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."¹

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 signal 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 a gift 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 Pope 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.² As first official witness to the resurrection of Jesus and

a leading figure among the apostles, Peter was portrayed as a fisher of men, a shepherd, a pastor of the sheep, the receiver of special revelation, and the rock on whom the Church was to be built.

A second tradition which became joined 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 traditional 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 instruction 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, was consulted by other bishops on a wide variety of doctrinal and moral questions, and sent legates to faraway councils."³

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 president of this see, but also the primate of all the bishops"⁴ was from a Roman Catholic point of view only one step in

a process of doctrinal development which ended neither with Vatican I's definition of papal infallibility nor with Vatican II's clarification on the bishop's share in the Church's highest 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 heritage of the 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 Lutheran participants 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, in a larger communion which would include the Lutheran churches."⁵

Similarly, the "Venice Statement" of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), after discussing both the primatial and conciliar aspects of oversight (*episcopate*), states the following: "The only See which makes any claim to universal primacy and which has exercised and still exercises such *episcopate* 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."⁶

As more interest is expressed in the Petrine ministry on the part of non-Catholic Christians, it becomes increasingly necessary for the Roman Catholic Church to develop a more pastoral, truly collegial style of leadership for this

unique ministry serving the visible unity of the Church.

For Roman Catholics the Petrine primacy is a matter of dogma. At the same time, the development of the papacy has been influenced by social, cultural and political factors that are not identical with the dogmatic meaning of the primacy and which can frustrate the very purpose it is intended to serve.

Therefore, we need to ask, what can be separated out as historically or culturally conditioned accidents from the theological essence?

In what follows I will try to suggest some ways in which the present manner of exercising the Petrine ministry might be changed in order to help exhibit the pastoral and collegial style which will be necessary for tomorrow's Church.

1. A More Participatory Style of Decision 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."⁷ 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 and can be circumscribed by certain limits, for the advantage of the Church or of the faithful."⁸

Synodal structures

Without taking anything away theologically from the leadership role of the Bishop of Rome or of the episcopal college, it would be possible for the Roman Catholic Church to develop a more participatory style of government, involving wider consultation and representation of the laity. Certainly the syn-



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.

3. 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 as historically acquired powers and rights of the Roman See do not in fact pertain dogmatically to the inalienable essence of the primacy."⁹

Tension not resolved

Rahner has suggested that in the interests of unity Rome could 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 appointed by the pope; they 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 as well as sacramental ordination by other bishops.¹⁰

Similarly one could ask if the law of clerical celibacy can be determined by Rome alone.

The tension between papal and episcopal authority has not yet been resolved but the power of the pope is in no way unlimited. At Vatican II Pope Paul VI requested that the council fathers add a note to the *Constitution on the Church* stating that although the pope has to respect the collegial power of the bishops he himself was accountable to God alone.

odal form of government of the churches of the Anglican Communion presents no obstacle to eventual reconciliation between that Communion and the Roman Catholic Church.

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

2. Relations Between Head and Members of the Episcopal College.

The relation between the head and members of the episcopal college has seen different historical expressions, 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 synod is presently 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.

¹Pope Paul VI to the Secretariat for Christian Unity, April 28, 1967. English translation in E. J. Arnold, *They Are in Earnest* (Slough, 1982), p. 66.

²Cf. *Peter in the New Testament*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, and John Reumann (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House and New York: Paulist Press, 1973).

³*Papal Primacy and the Universal Church: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue V*, ed. Paul C. Empie and T. Austin Murphy (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1974), Common Statement no. 17.

⁴MPL 54, 146-147, cited by Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "The Roman Primacy in the Patristic Era II: From Nicaea to Leo the Great," in *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church*, 73-97, p. 92.

⁵*Papal Primacy*, no. 32.

⁶ARCIC, "Authority in the Church I" no. 23 in *The Final Report* (Washington: USCC, 1982), p. 64.

⁷*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, no. 22 in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: American Press, 1966), p. 43.

⁸*Ibid.*, no. 37, Abbott p. 51.

⁹Karl Rahner, "Open Questions in Dogma Considered by the Institutional Church as Definitively Answered," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 15 (1978) 211-226, p. 219.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 216.


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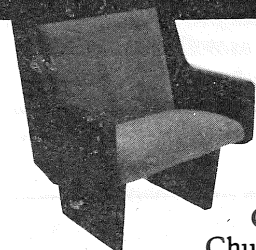
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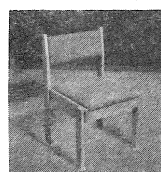
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It would appear that any exercise of magisterial infallibility in the future Church will be both a collegial and a communal undertaking.

The Theological Commission rejected his request, replying: "The Roman Pontiff is bound to abide by Revelation itself, the basic structure of the Church, the sacraments, the definitions of the first councils, etc. It is impossible to list them all."¹¹

4. Infallibility.

The doctrine of infallibility is one of the most complex issues to resolve, though it is not often properly understood by either Protestants 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 the 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 "who 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 respect to infallibility.¹²

In response to this concern Rahner makes several observations.

First, he states that since it is clear conciliar 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 Christianity rather than the further material differentiation of that substance, as for example, the Marian dogmas of Pius XI and Pius XII represented.

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

Finally he raises 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?"¹³

However one chooses to answer this question, it would appear that any exercise of 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 universal 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.

Renewed 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.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 223.

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¹¹Cited by J. M. R. Tillard, *The Bishop of Rome*, trans. John de Stage (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1983), p. 41.

¹²Rahner, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

P.J. RIGA

The Broadest Dimensions of Morality

I.

Jesus responds to the question of the meaning of human existence by a *moral* teaching and doctrine. The first words pronounced by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew are the beatitudes.¹ 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 follow² also propose norms of an ethical nature: A greater justice than that of the ancient law.

This "new" justice (or new moral life) 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 you love.³

This moral law has as its essential object to establish an absolute meaning. It actually integrates that which seems to be an obstacle to this absolute meaning of life, namely, suffering and death. These beatitudes value deprivations and trials; love even makes of death its proper sacrament: "Greater love hath no man than that he give his life. . ."⁴

What is at first blush a negation of meaning becomes its condition: "He who seeks his life, shall lose it; who loses his life, shall find it."⁵ It is by this assimilation of the negative that evangelical morality goes beyond a simple human, pragmatic or sociological plane: If death can become a means, it

is because it is not an absolute end; there is a "beyond" which escapes death, but to which only death can introduce us: "Unless a grain of wheat dies. . ."⁶

Unique task

The principle sign of mortality is death which we go "beyond" because the infinite is promised to man. *Pragmatic human morality teaches us to love; religious morality teaches us — and introduces us into — the meaning of life in the measure in which it also teaches us the meaning of death and how to die.*

This religious morality is not simply a rule of correct conduct which preserves our life and preserves us from death; what we seek is wisdom. Religious morality does not simply situate man before the demands of life or before his relationship with others; it situates him in relationship to the Absolute beyond death. This is the unique task of religious morality which no other morality can even approach.

II.

Theological tradition has always insisted on the fact that Christianity is more than a morality. But, this is to have a very narrow view of morality and to restrain its circumference *a priori*. One of the merits of Bergson was to have denounced the tendency to reduce morality to a narrow and enclosed moralism and to have emphasized morality's religious and mystical role. If Christianity is more than a morality, it is only in the measure that it has reemphasized the absolute demand of morality which is present in man and which defines him.

It is helpful to remember that it is in the measure that one is animated with a moral sense that a man can even discover the true notion of transcendence and of the infinite. It is the experience

of the demand to do good, the consciousness of being called to be better, and in this sense, of being more, wherein is revealed to man his vocation to infinity.

When man understands that he has no right to remain enclosed within himself, within the limits imposed on him by his proper limits; when the demand for goodness invites him to go beyond himself and to transcend himself, it is then and only then that man understands the meaning of his life which is transcendent.

Infinite demand

In the demand of the Absolute (which is goodness) the limits of man are not definitive and he is not a prisoner to them. He can grow interiorly and become always better than he is, without measure and indefinitely. *The desire for good always is greater in man only when he responds actively to that desire. Goodness carries within itself its own transcendence.*

In its practice, it is revealed as more and more demanding, more and more transcending. And, it is by this infinite demand that goodness is revealed to man as meaning to and in his life.

It is this demanding and infinite character of morality which establishes religion and not vice-versa. To make of religion the foundation of morality is to have a religion which is not rooted in life and, therefore, based on false transcendence; it also means that what we have is a fragile morality because it is incapable of finding *in itself* its own justification since the goodness which it proposes is not absolute.

Only morality establishes a valid transcendence because true transcendence is not objective but interior to us; this morality does not reveal a God exterior to me as someone who is "totally other," but as interior God who, in me, desires to grow with me. It is a God to whom I am related and bound (*religio*) and His infinity is now tied to mine.

¹Mt 5:1-12.

²Mt 5:13-48; Chaps. 6 and 7.

³Cf. Jn 15:13, Lk 18:22; Mt 5:20, 44; 6:24, etc.

⁴Jn 15:13.

⁵Mt 10:39.

⁶Jn 12:24.