

The Foundations and Structures for Shared Responsibility

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The twentieth century has seen important developments in official church recognition of the responsibility of lay persons. Lay persons have always been crucial to the life of the Church, ranging from the role exercised by parents in handing on the faith, to the special positions exercised by key lay people down through history. But in the current century, the attention of the Church's official magisterium has been turned to the responsibility of all lay persons in the life and work of the Church, with some remarkable results.

Between the world wars the popes placed special emphasis on "Catholic Action." Eventually described as the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy, it was an official effort to include lay persons in the Church's mission in the world and also, to some extent, in the inner life of the Church itself. The development of lay apostles, as they were sometimes called, was a first and important step toward the fuller recognition of the responsibility of all Christians.

Church Teaching at Vatican II

Many bishops came to the Second Vatican Council with Catholic Action and the lay apostolate as part of their own backgrounds. They sensed a need to recognize these practical experiences in their churches. In discussing the nature and mission of the Church, they developed a more explicit statement on Christian responsibility in the context of a deeper understanding of the Church itself. As a result, at least three major elements of the council's teaching developed an explicitly theological basis for shared responsibility.

First, the council developed an understanding of the Church as the People of God. After debating the point specifically, the members of the

council reorganized their constitution on the Church to place the treatment of what is common to all the People of God, hierarchy and laity alike, before the sections that deal with the hierarchical structures of the Church and lay persons in the Church. This was a major shift in the way of thinking that had marked the Church for over a thousand years. Instead of seeing Catholics as composed of two types of persons, we are recognized as being first of all one people who have more in common than that which separates us into different categories.

Second, the council addressed the responsibility of all the People of God for the communion that is the Church and the mission Christ gave the Church. Here again a new way of thinking was adopted, recognizing that the members of God's people have a true equality with regard to the dignity and the activity common to all the faithful for building up the Body of Christ. Even where there are differences, as between the priesthood of all the baptized and the ordained priesthood, these are intended to be complementary, working together for effective mission as a Church.

Third, Christ is seen as the basis for lay involvement in this mission. Shifting from the emphasis on participation in the hierarchy's apostolate, the council recognized a lay apostolate to which Christ commissions those who are baptized and confirmed. Further responsibilities and rights are found among the People of God as a result of the action of the Spirit in granting a variety of gifts to Christians. The role of the hierarchy is to assure order in the communion of Christian life, to test various initiatives to be sure they are genuine, and to support all the faithful in carrying out the mission that hierarchy and laity are called to fulfill.

The Second Vatican Council went on to apply these new ways of thinking to the responsibility all share for the communion and the mission Christ gave the Church. In various documents the council addressed the source for that responsibility, its object, where it is to be applied, and the methods for carrying it out. Let us briefly explore each of these in turn.

There are three levels to the sources of responsibility for the Church's communion and mission. Baptism and confirmation are presented as the first and essential basis. All are equal in terms of their dignity as initiated Christians and in regard to the responsibilities of the baptized. A second source are the gifts of the Spirit known as "charisms," whether the ordinary types that are found widely distributed in the Church or the more spectacular kinds that are spoken of in the Scriptures. There is a third source for certain offices or services provided in the name of the Church; here the hierarchy must provide authorization for someone to assume such responsibilities.

Whatever the source, all are responsible in various ways for the threefold work that comprises the mission of the Church; to teach, to sanctify, and to govern. This last applies both to establishing the reign of justice and peace in the world, and to the inner life of the Church's communion. The object of the various responsibilities of the pope and bishops, of priests, of parents, of religious, indeed of all Christians are presented in these terms.

Where this responsibility is to be carried out was also addressed by the council. Each person is called by Christ to be a responsible Christian in the context of his or her life and condition in the Church. The council described the usual condition of lay persons as being in the world, sanctifying the secular world through their lives and work. Clergy were described as being usually involved in the works of the Church, ministering to and supporting the Christian community. Yet in

various ways both clergy and laity are responsible for addressing concerns within the Church and in the world.

Finally, the council looked at the method for living up to one's Christian responsibilities. This begins with an attitude of concern and solicitude for the communion and mission of the Church. It is worked out in various structures, ranging from the many organizations that Christians set up to carry out their responsibilities, to offices organized by the hierarchy, to mutual collaboration in various church bodies or councils that plan what is needed for the life and work of the Church, or to coordinate the efforts of various groups.

Vatican II presents two types of councils, which the United States experience has usually combined into one. Pastoral councils, whether at the diocesan or parish level, are described in terms of pastoral planning, investigating what is needed for the communion and mission of the Church to progress, and then proposing practical steps to carry this out. Other councils are described whose purpose is to coordinate lay apostolates and organizations. These could exist at all levels of the Church, from the parish through the deanery and diocese to national councils. In many parishes and dioceses in the United States, the pastoral council has combined representatives of various active organizations and a cross section representing the Church generally, attempting to draw on the best of both approaches for planning and coordinating the Church's communion and mission locally.

After the Second Vatican Council, the question arose as to what term to use for the collaboration of bishops, clergy, religious, and laity in the communion and mission of the Church. It took some time to find a label that was acceptable. Some drew on the word "collegiality," which the council used in a special meaning to relate the pope and bishops as successors in the mission of the apostles. "Collegiality" carries such a technical meaning that it did not seem well

suited for the broader use applied to all the Church.

"Coresponsibility" and "shared responsibility" are other terms that were tried. "Coresponsibility" has the disadvantage of seeming to imply that all have the same responsibilities, rather than that all are equally responsible but for carrying out different responsibilities or tasks. "Shared responsibility" meant to some the extension of a responsibility that properly belonged only to a few (e.g., the bishops) but which they shared or parceled out to others. This has been corrected in recent years. Shared responsibility now refers to a responsibility we share to build up the communion of the Church and to carry on the mission that Christ gave to the Church, but which we do by fulfilling the various tasks or responsibilities proper to each Catholic.

Canon Law

In 1983 Pope John Paul II issued a new Code of Canon Law, drawn up to implement the decisions and way of thinking of the Second Vatican Council. The Code has several provisions that reinforce the shared responsibility of all Christians for the communion and mission of the Church and the need for structures to implement this.

In the canons on the obligations and rights of all Christians, the Code restates the council's teaching on the true equality among the baptized with regard to their dignity and activity for building up the Body of Christ (c. 208), and affirms the obligation all have to participate in building up the communion and holiness of the Church and carrying out its mission (cc. 209-211).

All are free to express their needs and desires to church authorities, and all have the right and sometimes the duty to share their opinions with them on matters pertaining to the good of the Church (c. 212, §§ 2 and 3). While the council

added that structures such as pastoral councils should be provided for this, the Code leaves many of the structural details for implementing these responsibilities up to local decisions.

In dealing with lay persons specifically, the Code reaffirms their role in the Church's mission (c. 225) and their role in contributing to the inner life of the Church under church authorities, either as office holders or as advisors (c. 228). Bishops are to be concerned with the faithful in their dioceses (c. 383, § 1) and to foster and coordinate the various aspects of the apostolate there (c. 394, § 1). Pastors of parishes have a similar responsibility (c. 529, § 2).

Because of the diversity that exists in a worldwide Church, the Code does not require a Diocesan Pastoral Council in every diocese and leaves the decision on whether to require parish councils up to each diocesan bishop, in consultation with the presbyteral council (c. 536). The law does encourage Diocesan Pastoral Councils, in keeping with local pastoral needs (c. 511), and indicates its responsibility is to work with the bishop in regard to everything that pertains to pastoral work, evaluating the situation in the diocese and proposing practical conclusions.

The law sets down some basic provisions about pastoral councils (cc. 511-514) but leaves most details up to local decisions. If a Diocesan Pastoral Council is established, it is to consist of priests, religious, and lay Catholics who reflect a cross section of the people of the diocese. The council is to be run according to its own statutes confirmed by the bishop, and it operates under the authority of the bishop. It has a consultative role in the diocese, so that when the office of bishop is vacant, the council ceases.

Throughout the Code there is repeated encouragement for consultation between bishops and those they serve. Although there are only a limited number of items where this is required for

the validity of some action, the overall concern is that the bishop be truly informed about what he is doing, and that he consult with those who by baptism share a responsibility for the communion and mission of the Church in that part of the world.

Consultation means two things in the Code. When the law is dealing with an organized group, such as a Provincial Council, Diocesan Pastoral Council, or Diocesan Synod, everyone who is entitled to be present for the meeting has the right to speak and to be heard. This is a "consultative vote" (or "voice," as we often call it in this country). The right to make the final decision on the position of the group is often restricted to certain participants; they are said to have a "deliberative vote" (or "vote," as we commonly call it). On a Diocesan Pastoral Council, for example, there may be some persons who are invited to meetings and are asked to take part in the discussion, but only those with a right to vote on the council have a "deliberative vote" in this canon law sense. It is obvious, however, that everyone who participates in the discussion contributes toward the final decision.

Consultation can also refer in canon law to the advice that a church executive obtains before taking some action (c. 127). The law sets down certain occasions when a bishop, for example, must listen to other persons before he can exercise his executive initiative to do something. There are times when all he is required to do is to listen to their advice, although for a serious reason he can still go against it. At other times he must obtain their clearance (consent) before he is free to take his own initiative. While there are no instances where the Code specifically requires a bishop to obtain the advice or consent of a Diocesan Pastoral Council, the intent of the law is that before taking a major decision the bishop is to seek the advice of all who are knowledgeable and concerned. This is required in financial matters; it is presumed in pastoral ones.

Summary

Shared responsibility is a reality in our Church today. It is based on the communion that is the nature of the Church and the mission Christ entrusted to that Church. Communion is not the work of one, but the bonding together of all. The mission is not entrusted only to a few, but is the responsibility of all the People of God. The duty and right for apostolic initiative resides with all in virtue of baptism and confirmation, specified through the gifts given by the Spirit, and supported and coordinated through the ministry of the hierarchy.

There is a need to plan and to coordinate the efforts of the various members of God's people, and this task is also more than a limited few can carry out. The Church's official teaching and canon law provide for structured expressions of shared responsibility that are to be adapted to local circumstances. The process of consultation is designed to provide a means for the people of the Church to voice their needs and concerns, to share their experiences and insights, and to enable appropriate decisions to be reached for

This theological and canonical basis is only a beginning, however. It is the good of the communion of the Church and its mission. From the lived experience of shared responsibility that further insights will be developed in the Church, so that the mystery of our life in Christ will continue to be a light to all the peoples.

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