

Communion and Change

Fr. Joseph A. Komonchak

The title given to me, “Communion and Change,” corresponds with two of the main purposes for which Pope John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council: the spiritual renewal of the Catholic Church and its *aggiornamento*, updating, to make it more pastorally effective in the modern world.

The goal of spiritual renewal focuses attention on what is central about the Church: participation in the divine life. This was the theme of the first chapter of the Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*), entitled “The Mystery of the Church.” Here the origin of the Church from the Trinity is set out, and the host of biblical images that speak of it are briefly reviewed. The chapter ends with an insistence that it is at once a holy community of faith, hope and charity and a visible structure, the mystical Body of Christ and a hierarchically endowed society, a spiritual community and a visible group, endowed with heavenly gifts and existing here on earth, at once holy and always needing purification, a Church that subsists in the Catholic Church (*LG* 8). The chapter ends with an insistence that it is at once a holy community of faith, hope and charity and a visible structure, the mystical Body of Christ and a hierarchically endowed society, a spiritual community and a visible group, endowed with heavenly gifts and existing here on earth, at once holy and always needing purification, a Church that subsists in the Catholic Church (*LG* 8). The great task of ecclesiology is to try to understand how all these things, apparently contradictory and certainly at least paradoxical, can be said about the one Church.

St. Thomas Aquinas asked the question: What is the distinctive mark of the new Law, the new Covenant? His answer was that the new Law is the grace of the Holy Spirit, a law not written on stone tablets but on transformed hearts. Everything else, he said, serves either to prepare for the reception of this gift or to articulate its implications. Everything else, however necessary, even things divinely appointed—the sacraments, the apostolic ministry, even the New Testament—is the letter that would kill except for the Spirit. Only the Spirit gives life. Similarly, the Council teaches that the two dimensions of the Church are “so constituted that the human is directed toward and subordinated to the divine, the visible to the invisible.” (*SC* 2). “The social structure of the Church,” it says in *LG* 8, “serves the Spirit of Christ who vivifies it, in the building up of the body.” This emphasis on what is central in ecclesiology has led to the great interest in the last two decades in the notion of the Church as *koinonia*, communion.

The term is biblical and never set out more powerfully than in the first verses of the First Epistle of St. John: “What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you so that you may have communion with us, and our communion is with God and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” Communion describes the central reality that is the new life in God that Christ has brought us, and that vertical communion grounds the horizontal communion among all those who are given to know and to enjoy that great blessing. We might ask ourselves some questions: Does this central simplicity inform our ecclesiologies, our thoughts and feelings about the Church? Do we often think about it? How often is it the first thing that

comes to mind when we hear the word “Church”? Do we not tend to take it for granted? Do we not more often focus on the secondary elements, the rightful claims of authority, say, or who controls the money, or the abuses of the so-called “institutional Church”?

I ask these questions because this spiritual dimension of our life in the Church is too often taken for granted, not “owned” (as some say today) by everyone, but it is surely the main reason for one of the few bright spots in the very dark landscape of the last few years: the fidelity of the great majority of the Catholic people. They have not stopped coming for the common worship; they have not stopped their ministries of charity and justice; they have not stopped their financial support; they have not stopped sending their children to Catholic schools; they have not stopped expressing affection and support for their priests. Above all, they have not stopped believing. They still say the Creed on Sundays; they still bring their griefs and their regrets before the merciful God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ; they still listen for comfort and challenge to the Word of God; they still come to be fed at the table of sacrifice; they still live in the awareness that they are members of Christ’s Body, members of one another, experiencing more keenly than ever before the truth of what St. Paul said: “if one member suffers, all the members suffer.” This sense of the Church, of themselves as the Church, of what is vital for there to be a Church, translates a good deal of what is meant by the term “communion.”

The term is not to be over-spiritualized, however, brought in as a kind of spiritual fog to blur the sharp edges of disputes in the Church. And here we turn to some of the elements of change, of needed reform and updating, that the Council endorsed. One of the main emphases of the Council was the common responsibility of all members for the life and mission of the Church, this in order to overcome a highly clericalized ecclesiology, and one which was embodied in a top-down structure of authority. This represented, in the first place, a rehabilitating of the place and role of lay people in the Church. Going beyond a negative description of the laity as everyone except the clergy and the religious, *Lumen gentium* describes them as “Christian believers who, incorporated into Christ by baptism, constituted within the People of God, and in their own way sharing in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ, have their own part to play in the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world” (LG 31). The Council was at pains to note “the common dignity of the Church’s members that derives from their rebirth in Christ, the common grace of being God’s children, the common call to perfection, the single salvation, the single hope, and the undivided charity.” It excludes any “inequality arising from race or nationality, social condition, or sex” and insists that the differentiation of ministries exists within “a true equality among all with regard to the dignity and to the activity that is common to all for the building up of the Body of Christ” (LG 32). In addition to acting through the ordained ministry and the sacraments the Spirit gives special gifts to the faithful, “from the reception of which, even the most ordinary ones, arises a right and duty to exercise them in the Church and in the world..., in the freedom of the Holy Spirit... and in communion with their brothers and sisters in Christ and with their pastors especially” (AA 3). On all these sacramental and charismatic bases, the Council grounded a set of rights and duties for all Christians, which include the right to “receive in abundance the help of the spiritual goods of the Church,” the right and at times the duty to express their views on Church matters, and the right to initiate activities

in the service of the Church. In addition, it stated the ability of the laity to engage in more immediate forms of cooperation in the apostolate of the hierarchy and to be appointed to some ecclesiastical offices (*LG* 33, 35). Such statements have prompted the spectacular increase in various activities, ministries, and associations of lay people that we have seen since the Council, one of the demonstrations of the Council's claim that "the Church is not truly established and does not fully live, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ, unless there is a genuine laity existing and working alongside the hierarchy" (*AG* 21).

This effort to validate and encourage the participation of all in the life and work of the Church at all levels was reflected in the Council's call for co-responsibility and for the establishment of structures to enable it. Thus, on the parish-level, the Council called for structures, such as parish councils, through which the laity could exercise their right, and even their duty, to make known their views on matters concerning the good of the Church (*LG* 37). Similarly, on the diocesan level, it endorsed senates or councils of priests and pastoral councils composed of priests, religious, and laity (*CD* 27). Finally, with regard to the governance of the whole Church, the Council sought to restore a greater sense of the collegial character of the episcopate, that is, of the common responsibility for the whole Church of the whole body of bishops, carried out both by the faithful fulfilment of their responsibilities in their individual dioceses and by such forms of collective responsibility as episcopal conferences and the Synod of Bishops.

In addition to these official institutions for co-responsibility, the Council also vindicated the right of all the faithful to create and to join associations in the service of the apostolate. It distinguished three types of such enterprises: those created and directed by the faithful on their own initiative; some of these associations that are given special approval, called a mandate; and other associations that are established and directed by the hierarchy (*AA* 24). "While preserving intact the necessary link with ecclesiastical authority, the laity have the right to establish such associations and to join existing ones" (*AA* 19).

The rights and obligations that the Council set out here and there in its texts were gathered together and listed in the revised Code of Canon Law (cc. 208-22). Here are some of them:

- ab to spread the good news of salvation;
- ab to make their needs and their desires known to the clergy;
- ab to tell their pastors their views on matters concerning the good of the Church and to make them known to others;
- ab to receive from the clergy spiritual goods, especially the word of God and sacraments;
- ab to found and direct associations for charitable or spiritual aims, or to promote the Christian vocation in the world, and to hold meetings for these purposes;
- ab to take their own initiatives in apostolic actions;
- ab to vindicate their rights in competent ecclesiastical fora.

It has to be said that the Council was rather deficient in describing the kinds of institutions that might be needed in order to give concreteness to its exhortations; it essentially took for granted the general lines of the structures of authority in the Church, presumed them to be valid. There was a good deal of talk about co-responsibility in the first decade or so after the Council, but I don't have the impression that it is taken as seriously today. Many parishes do not have parish councils and in many of those that do have them, they are not given much to do. In a good many dioceses pastoral councils scarcely ever meet, and even the presbyteral councils have been emasculated. On the international level, the Synod of Bishops has become little more than a privy chamber; not only is their agenda prescribed for them, they are even told what things they may or may not recommend to the pope. Impatience at the over-centralization of authority in Rome, a good number of important prelates regard the restoration of collegial responsibility as one of the main tasks of the next pontificate.

Symbolic of the current unbalanced situation is the fact that local Churches have next to no say in who their pastors and bishops will be. Let me approach this issue from a little-known section of our canonical system. Both of the Codes of Canon Law (1917 and 1983) describe the reasons for which a bishop may remove a pastor. The general principle is that a bishop may act when there is any cause that is rendering a pastor's ministry harmful or at least ineffective (both Codes make a point that such a situation might arise even without any serious guilt on the part of the pastor). They then offer examples of the more important of such causes. The first of these is fairly obvious: incompetence or permanent infirmity of mind or body which makes the pastor incapable of properly fulfilling his duties. But then come some reasons that might not be so obvious. A pastor can also be removed if he loses his good reputation among upright and serious people; if he has earned the hatred of his people (*odium plebis* in the old Code; the new Code says "*aversio in parochum*," which might seem a lesser matter, although one of the classical meanings of the Latin word is "loathing"), even if this alienation, said the old Code, is unjust and not universal, as long, say both Codes, as it is not expected to end any time soon; if, even after warnings, he seriously neglects or violates his parochial duties; if he has poorly administered temporal (that is, financial) matters with serious harm to the Church.

In short the Codes make it clear that a pastor who has lost his reputation, from whom the people turn away, no longer seeking his ministry, who seriously neglects his duties, who causes serious financial loss to the Church, is a pastor who has lost his effective authority. It might be noted that, although these criteria are not applied to the cases of bishops (the process for removing bishops is nowhere mentioned in the Code), it recently became quite clear in several cases in our country that they hold also in the case of bishops.

Sociological wisdom underlies these norms, but so does great theological wisdom. In the nineteenth century, two great Catholic thinkers spoke in nearly identical terms of the ground of real, de facto, authority in the Church. John Henry Newman argued that the good functioning of authority in the Church rests upon the people's "admiration, trust and love" for Christ and the Church. Antonio Rosmini said that "the principal cause of good

effects in pastoral government is the love, esteem, and trust that the faithful have for the pastor who is to guide them to eternal life”. They were not making a merely homiletic point; they were talking about the actual existence and effective functioning of authority. Let me try to explain.

We live in a structured Church, a Church in which we believe Christ has established certain offices of authority to whose holders he has promised the assistance of his Holy Spirit. That is why we respect those offices and those who occupy them, or at least we are supposed to respect them. I put that last phrase in “or at least we are supposed to respect them,” not in order to be glib, but because there is nothing automatic or mechanical about this whole social reality. An office of authority exists in the Church in the sense that a description of the functions it entails can be written, and one can make the case that either because of divine institution or for pragmatic reasons, this office is necessary or useful. But the condition that people continue to show respect to the office is that it be regularly occupied by someone who can be respected, that is, someone who deserves the admiration, esteem, love and trust of the people. People who prove unworthy of respect and trust may continue to occupy the office—be in authority—but cease to have authority, that is, cease to enjoy the admiration, trust and love of their people. And, of course, if people are often enough appointed to the office who prove not to be worthy of this admiration, trust and love, then even the office will cease to be respected and trusted. It should not need to be stated that these attitudes, affections, cannot be coerced. You can’t order people to admire someone, to trust someone, to love someone.

Now if, in fact, Church law provides a place for the judgements and attitudes of the people to have a say in the removal of a pastor or a bishop, the question will naturally arise whether they should not have a say in the appointment of a bishop or a pastor. This should not be dismissed as revolutionary, something aimed at turning the Church into a democracy. It was once considered a normative, even an apostolic norm that the clergy and the people have a voice in the selection of their bishops. St. Cyprian gave the reason: the people know the candidates and can testify to their worthiness or can refuse the unworthy. Pope after pope, council after council, reaffirmed this norm until well into the Middle Ages. St. Celestine I, noted that a bishop had been appointed from outside a local church and without its participation, and he coined the often repeated axiom: “*Nullus in vitis detur episcopus*,” “No bishop is to be imposed on an unwilling people. The consent and desires of the clergy and people must be sought out.” The same pope said that it should be very rare that a bishop is not chosen from among the clergy of the local Church, and that the local clergy had a right to refuse a bishop imposed from without. It was another pope, Leo I, no slouch when it came to defending papal and episcopal power, who made his own an axiom of Roman law: “The one who is to preside over all should be chosen by all.” And he gave a reason: “No bishop is to be ordained for an unwilling people, who have not asked for him. Otherwise the city may either despise or hate the undesired one and may become less religious than it should because they were not permitted to have the one they wanted.”

If transparency and accountability are also desired for the financial affairs of the Church, there is traditional warrant for this, too, for example, in the axiom of Pope Innocent III

(1198-1216), no democrat he: “What affects all should be approved by all.”

One might ask those who would wish to defend the present top-heavy structures of the Church to explain why the ancient maxims should no longer apply? Has something changed in the nature of the Church so that what popes and councils once enjoined is thought no longer valid, is considered revolutionary? Discussing these matters, Yves Congar noted that when the Church is able to order her own life freely and in accord with her own nature, the whole community has an active part. Thirty years ago, Louis Bouyer was proposing a return to the ancient practices for electing bishops. The Church has never enjoyed as much freedom as it has now; should not the selection of leaders be a responsibility of the whole Church? It is this body of believers whose admiration, trust and love he must enjoy, and it was this necessity that Rosmini had in mind when he argued for the voice of the whole local church in the selection of their bishop.

All this said, it remains, of course, that 99.9% of the Church are lay people, and it is necessary to ask what they can do in the meantime. They can continue to press the issues, not let them fall away from everyone’s attention. They can speak up in parishes, write to pastors and bishops. They can volunteer for what offices and other opportunities give them a voice. They can write for journals such as *Commonweal* and *America*, or for secular journals. They can spread the word about conferences such as this one.

Such actions will presuppose lay people knowledgeable about their faith and committed to it and to the Church. And this provides a moment to say a word about what contribution Catholic colleges and universities can make. They can sponsor symposia such as this one, certainly, and bring intellectual resources together to discuss the problems. But I think their primary contribution should be that of being good Catholic colleges and universities, that is, by preparing new generations of lay people to take up their responsibilities in the Church and in the world. Sixty years ago, John Courtney Murray set them as the main goal of theological education at this level, and I think it serves still as a useful criterion for evaluating programs and curricula.

One final paragraph. The questions many Catholics are raising today, the cries we hear, are not the voice of rebellion, or at least not most of them; they come from faithful people; they are a call to evangelical honesty and simplicity, to the generative center of the Church’s life, to the essentials. Isn’t this where we have to think things through? Shouldn’t we be allowed to question whether all the things Aquinas thought were secondary are in fact serving to prepare people for “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:2) and to spell out what it means for our inter-relations in and as the Church, for our several responsibilities? Shouldn’t these questions be ones that we all ask, collectively and singly, lay people, religious, priests, bishops, pope? Someone may say that such questions are dangerous; surely nothing would be more dangerous than to think that we can go back to the *status quo ante*.