

10-26-07 - The church inverted: Catholics must focus more on their base, less on their leaders  
By EDWARD P. HAHNENBERG, National Catholic Reporter

The image of the church as a pyramid has suffered its share of critique -- with good reason. The image seems to capture everything we find so problematic about the church today. It evokes a descending hierarchy, a clericalism that puts the ordained on top and a passivity that keeps the laity down.

But for all its problems, a pyramid has one thing going for it: Its base is broad and solid.

Over the past year I've been to a number of dioceses around the country where a different image is at work in people's minds. The church is still a pyramid, but the pyramid has been turned upside down.

This inverted image comes through most clearly in those dioceses facing an interregnum, where they either have a bishop near retirement, are awaiting the appointment of a new bishop, or haven't yet gotten to know their newly installed bishop. In anxious tones, diocesan staff, lay ministers and active parishioners alike talk about "the new bishop" as if the future life of their church depended on him.

The bishop is no longer the pinnacle of the pyramid but its pivot point. On his personality and his ecclesiology seem to rest the whole local church. The laity, clergy and diocesan ministries are all perched, as it were, precariously on his shoulders.

Many active Catholics worry a great deal about the new bishop. (I admit that as my own ordinary approaches 75, I find myself worrying about it too.) Will he be able to maintain the delicate balance of church life or will the whole thing come crashing down?

In his latest book, *The New American Story*, former Sen. Bill Bradley reflects on pyramids and politics -- returning to an argument he first articulated in an op-ed piece for *The New York Times* ("A Party Inverted," March 30, 2005). In that earlier essay, coming shortly after the 2004 election, the one-time Democratic presidential candidate expressed his admiration for what the Republicans had done right -- not just in 2004, but over the past 40 years.

Beginning in the late 1960s, Republican leaders set out on a coordinated, long-term effort to spread conservative ideas on college campuses, in academic journals and in the news media. This took shape during the 1970s and 1980s in a comprehensive structure that Mr. Bradley suggests looks like a pyramid.

At the pyramid's base are individual donors and foundations that finance conservative research centers and think tanks, which make up the second level of the pyramid. These organizations push their ideas up to a third level, the political level, where the Karl Roves, the Ralph Reeds and their pollsters shape these ideas into a winning message. This message is then disseminated by the fourth level, the partisan news media. At the top of the pyramid sits the president. Because the pyramid is stable, it doesn't really matter who you put on top. The conservative policy agenda has already been set.

Mr. Bradley sees the Democratic Party inverting the pyramid. Every four years, the whole thing balances unsteadily on a single point, the presidential candidate. Still hypnotized by Kennedy's Camelot, Democrats hope for that charismatic leader who will change America by the sheer force of his (or her) personality.

Rather than build a comprehensive structure, Democrats wait for the messiah. And every four years, Democrats sound a lot like Monty Python's mob: "I say you're the messiah, and I should know. I've followed a few!" To reverse this trend, Mr. Bradley concludes, Democrats must resist entrusting their dreams to individual candidates and instead make a commitment to build the pyramid from the ground up.

American Catholics aren't waiting for JFK in a miter. We don't expect our bishop to be a superstar. Most of us just want a leader with some pastoral sense and a flexible mind. But I wonder if we're still too focused on the

guy in charge. What if we took Mr. Bradley's advice for his party and applied it to our church -- thinking of the laity not as the bottom of the pyramid, but as its base?

How would we build the base of our local church? Surely it can't be about funding think tanks or crafting sound bites, though money is a factor and articulating our concerns is important. Mr. Bradley's frustration with Democrats is two-fold. First, by the time a presidential nominee is chosen, the frantic campaign rush allows no time for considered debate about ideas, no time for patient and sustained conversation within the party about the future of our country. Second, the inverted pyramid tends to discourage participation at the local level. Leaping over structures that bring people together, the party encourages a direct connection between the national candidate and the individual voter, who basically becomes a spectator or consumer. Average Democrats who want to get involved in politics become frustrated because their party hasn't given them anything to do except send in money.

For Mr. Bradley, fostering broad conversation and local participation go together. Both are essential to building the base. It is as true in the church as it is in politics. Catholics in the United States have everything we need to start talking seriously about our hopes and vision for this church of ours -- a habit of engagement, extensive education, and resources ranging from our parish and school networks to our Catholic colleges and universities to our many journals, associations and ministry programs. The pieces are there to build a sustained conversation that leads to action. All that's needed is the commitment to do it.

To get there, we might begin by worrying less about who's on top. One good bishop I met along the way articulated his vision like this: "My goal," he said, "is to get this local church so used to participating, so engaged and so empowered, that the guy who replaces me can't do anything about it!"

We've got to stop dreaming about more bishops like this one, and instead start building the base ourselves.

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[Note: Paul Lakeland, of Fairfield U., spoke of an inverted pyramid a few years ago.]