

2-28-08 – Recovering Our Conciliar Tradition – COMMENTARY

VOTF Newsletter, In the Vineyard, Joseph F. O’Callaghan

Faced with the crisis of priestly sexual abuse, the American bishops in 2002 proclaimed their adherence to the twin principles of accountability and transparency and adopted a tepid statement promising fraternal correction. Nevertheless, the faithful are left without any assurance that the bishops will act on those principles. At present there are no effective structures in place that would enable the people to require an accounting from their spiritual leaders.

The need for structures of accountability is clearly evident and the history of the Church points to just such a means, namely, the diocesan, provincial, national, and ecumenical synods or councils held from the earliest times. The terms synod (from the Greek) and council (from the Latin) have essentially the same meaning. For the most part, though not always exclusively, these were assemblies of bishops gathered to discuss and to resolve a wide range of issues concerning the life of the Church, including creedal statements, questions of liturgical practice, the sacraments, and the spiritual life and discipline to be observed by the diverse members of the Christian community. In time scholars gathered the canons of church councils and organized them systematically in codes that could be utilized by the universal Church.

The conciliar mode of government characterized the Church from the earliest times as councils, large and small, assembled throughout the Christian world whenever significant matters needed resolution. By declaring that provincial councils should be held twice yearly the Council of Nicaea in 325 recognized the important role that councils could and did play in the life of the Church (c. 5). From the mid-eleventh century onward the conciliar model of Church government encountered the growing challenge of papal power. The Great Western Schism (1378-1419), pitting three popes against one another, however, created a new crisis of authority. Summoned to deal with this travesty, the Council of Constance set the principle of conciliarism against the unbridled authority of the pope, stating unequivocally in 1415 that final authority in the Church rests with a general council representing the whole body of the faithful. Ever since then popes have been wary of general councils. For that reason the convocation of the Council of Trent to deal with the Protestant Reformation was delayed until 1545, but by then the division between Protestant and Catholic Europe had solidified to such an extent that reconciliation was impossible.

Like Nicaea I, Trent recognized the importance of councils and decreed that diocesan councils should be summoned every year and provincial councils every three years. The American Church in the nineteenth century was in many ways a conciliar church as the bishops met with surprising frequency in provincial and later plenary councils at Baltimore. Papal suspicion of councils was so ingrained, however, that three hundred years elapsed between the end of the Council of Trent and Pius IX’s convocation of Vatican I, whose proclamation of papal infallibility added new strength to the papal armory. Even though Vatican II encouraged the convocation of councils, few bishops have made that a consistent practice.

The Church cries out today for new structures that will hold bishops accountable to the priests and people they lead. A return to the earlier conciliar tradition of the Church will give new life and vigor to Christ’s Body. Diocesan, provincial, national, and ecumenical councils or synods that are fully representative of the whole body of the faithful, bishops, priests, deacons, religious, laymen and women, and possessing deliberative authority on every issue that affects our spiritual lives, doctrinal, liturgical, disciplinary, administrative, and financial, are essential.

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