

# Pastoral Council—My Fondest Hope

## PART II

### Shared Responsibility

In opposition to any theories that would depict the Church as a class society, Vatican II underscored the fundamental equality of all persons in the Church. "The chosen people of God is one . . . As members, they share a common dignity from their rebirth in Christ. They have the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection. They possess in common one salvation; one hope, one undivided charity. Hence there is in Christ and in the Church no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex." (Constitution on Church 32; cf. Decree on Laity 2-3, Constitution on Church in Modern World 29, 92) The basic idea of the Church in Vatican II is that of a people, a communion, a fellowship in which all are called to the dignity and freedom of the sons of God, thanks to the Holy Spirit who dwells in all the members.

In such a society there is no room for any passive members. "From the reception of these charisms or gifts, including those which are less dramatic, there arise for each believer the right and duty to use them in the Church and in the world for the good of mankind and for the upbuilding of the Church." (Decree on Laity)

The pastors, who make up part of this community of mutual service, should not lord it over the flock. Their role is expressed in Constitution on Church, Par. 30: "Pastors also should know that they themselves were not meant by Christ to shoulder the entire saving mission of the Church toward the world. On the contrary, they understand that it is their noble duty so to shepherd the faithful and to recognize their services and charismatic gifts that all according to their proper roles may cooperate in this common undertaking with one heart."

There are significant parallels between good government in the Church and in secular society. The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World points out how in every good society today room must be made for freedom and initiative. "Man achieves such dignity when . . . he pursues his goal in a spontaneous choice of what is good, and procures for himself, through effective and skillful action, apt means to that end." (The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 17)

In a letter to Cardinal Roy on the 80th Anniversary of *Rerum novarum* (A Call to Action, 1971), Paul VI says that "a greater sharing in responsibility and in decision making" is "a demand made by the man of today." In the social and political sphere, he writes, "a reasonable sharing in responsibility and in decisions must be established and strengthened . . . In order to counterbalance increasing technology, modern forms of democracy must be devised, not only making it possible for each man to become informed and to express himself, but also by involving him in shared responsibility." In this way Pope Paul asserts, freedom may be used not selfishly, but generously, "in building up active and lived solidarity." (no. 47, pp. 26-27)

Does this kind of active and lived solidarity apply to the Church? Clearly yes, I believe, if the Church is a fellowship of life in which all are called to exercise their freedom and dignity as sons of God and to contribute, according to their gifts, to the upbuilding of the whole body. The Church has to develop new institutional forms in every age. "The visible and social structure of the Church can and ought to be enriched by the development of human social life. Whatever promotes human community life makes a contribution to the development of the Church community." (Constitution on Church in Modern World, 44) The mission of the Church to be a sign of human brotherliness requires "that we foster in the Church herself mutual esteem, reverence, and harmony, through the full recognition of lawful diversity. Thus all those who compose the one people of God, both pastors and the general faithful, can engage in mutual dialogue with ever-in-

creasing fruitfulness." (Constitution on Church in Modern World, 92)

The same thought runs through the Pastoral Instruction of the Pontifical Commission on the Means of Social Communication, issued in 1971 with the approval of Paul VI. After declaring that "the Church moves with the movement of man" (n. 117), this instruction goes on to recommend pastoral councils as a means by which the laity can play an active role in the life of the Church. A steady two-way flow of information is essential—says the instruction—to make it possible for such institutions to function properly.

My first theological reason for pastoral councils, then, is that they are a suitable organ for promoting the active sharing of all groups in the direction and conduct of the Church. Such active sharing is, I believe, necessary for the Church to achieve itself in our time as a society of freedom and mutual service and to be a credible sign of the charity of the gospel.

In connection with shared responsibility, the question is often asked whether pastoral councils are merely advisory or whether they have power to make juridically binding decisions. Paul VI says that they have a consultative vote. This I take to mean that in the areas in which they are consulted they play a normal role in the process by which binding decisions are reached. In other words, they facilitate the process of consultation through the thorough discussion of matters calling for practical resolution. This thorough discussion obviously requires access to all pertinent factors involved in the matter under discussion. This concept envisions that, when reasonable and prayerful men explore together a matter in depth, a consensus must normally evolve that is acceptable to the one who consults and to those who are consulted.

A Pastoral Council is not, therefore, an independent lawmaking body on the parliamentary model. Together with the bishop, but not apart from him, they may be said to have genuinely governmental authority.

(to be continued)

## Editorial

### Drink in Spring, a Natural Remedy

Pope Paul VI has offered some therapeutic advice for all of us living in these tense, troublesome and embittered times.

Raise your eyes, the pontiff said, from today's "preoccupying events and problems" and gaze on the wonders of Spring "with eyes that are neither shortsighted nor materialistic, but religious."

That may sound platitudinous but if we can tear ourselves away, even for small fragments of time, from the pressing events squeezing in on us, we may not only find some surcease but also some new perspectives to handle our chores more gracefully.

There are lessons in nature which should not be ignored as commonplace.

Who can be awakened by the fury of a spring thunderstorm or the majestic

howl of screeching wind without reflecting on the eternity of nature. Long before man began to make his frail scratchings on this universe, such wind and rain were tearing apart and reshaping not just landscapes but whole planets. They will be doing the same long after we have left.

Nor can all the great works of art in the world capture the thrill of a field of daffodils fluttering in a soft spring breeze.

And what better and easier way could humility be sensed than in feeling the warm stroke of sun on our brow and to realize that that same caress has revived the crocus and the maple and the green grass. And if unleashed in its full strength could decimate this entire solar system.

"Life begins anew," the Pope reflected. "How can we not take part in the choir which seems to sing the hymn of life and lend to that choir a voice that is both self-conscious and prayerful?"

"We must observe, study and admire the immense and wonderful painting in which our existence is unfolded: the skies with their silence and frightening depth; the atmosphere with its life of breath, winds and storms; the water, with its boundless oceans, and the earth, a gentle and firm mother."

We must stop, look and listen for our own good.

If His eye can be on the sparrow then perhaps we had better be spending at least a little more of our time reflecting on His work. It will help us with ours.