

Looking for the 'us' in the institution

By Father Robert Sherry
NC News Service

According to a popular image, the church in the first century after Christ lived in a golden age. The people of God lived in a land flowing with milk and honey, surviving on only peaches and cream.

With that image in the background, it is rumored that:

—If Jesus returned to earth today, he would not recognize the 20th century institutional church.

—Jesus would reserve a special woe for diocesan office buildings, a code of 1,752 canon laws, fund drives, and certain other organizational activities.

What would Jesus do with such an organization? Would he hire a consultant and conduct priority studies? Would he just start over?

What's a Messiah to do? Somebody once said: They govern best who govern least. But someone else said: They govern best who govern best.

When two people first fall in love, they glow just by looking at each other. Later, some routine sets in. With children running about, the parents enact house rules. Structures are set in place to retain some semblance of order and harmony.

As the children mature, they assume personal responsibility, laws are relaxed and life returns to a more leisurely pace.

I do not mean to imply that the church is a parent-figure. Instead, I am suggesting that, like the family, the church experiences different needs at different times. At particular times, institutional elements have been stressed more strongly than the understanding of the church as a family or community.

And the church has adapted. Even the favored images used to describe the church have changed: The sheep and the shepherd; the Mystical Body; the society of baptized believers; a hierarchical society. Today the phrase heard most often is "people of God."

During periods of transition, certain features of the institution may be stressed heavily. During the Reformation many thought the prudent position for the church to take was a defensive one with regard to the institution.

But as an old saying goes, when you are waist deep in alligators, it's easy to forget your job was to drain the swamp. Similarly, at times when stress is placed on the church's external institutional features, it is easy to forget that the church is a communion of people blessed by faith and grace.

Still, the institutional sense of self-identity tends to be applauded when we want to tell who we are and what our mission is.

Because God's work is truly our own, the church may not have acted responsibly these 2,000 years without some form of institution, laws and clerics.

The institution is not just "them." The institution is all of us; we are the church; we are the people of God.

The question that confronts Christians today, both as community and as institution, is this: How can the best of both elements be preserved in our age without losing our heritage on the one hand or over-regulating ourselves on the other?

As we mature as a family, grow in personal responsibilities and establish trusting relationships, we will, as people, fall short of perfection.

But because I believe we are guided by the Holy Spirit, I also believe we gradually discover ways of expressing our faith well in our times. So help us God.

(Father Sherry is director of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Priestly Formation.)

either/or

in the person of Peter.

To judge from the letters of Paul, the structures of the early Christian communities were relatively simple. In the course of time, however, Christian communities grew in size and practical problems of administration increased. More complex and controlled structures evolved.

In the worldwide church of today, organization is essential. But, this should not face us with a choice: organization or community. The two can co-exist comfortably, as long as we remember what enlivens the organization:

The church is a community of Christ's disciples, bound together by a common faith and love.

Without these, the necessary structures become a hollow shell. The New Testament brings this point home loud and clear.

(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth Mich.)

FOOD ...

...for thought

Time. Space.

Ponder the roles played in your life by time and space.

Whenever two or three people gather together — and especially if they make plans to gather again in the future — time-and-space realities begin to pervade the scene.

—Friends can't even make plans to see a film together without establishing a time to see it and a place to meet.

—Families can be counted on to establish special times and places at home for meals, for homework, for bedtime, for leisure activities.

—Similarly, at work, plans and programs are significantly influenced by time-and-space realities.

Time-and-space considerations tend to exert their influence in relationships that last — that endure — among people.

It seems that whenever two or three or more people plan for an ongoing activity that involves them all, some structures — however simple — begin to emerge among them. Their ongoing activity becomes structured along lines of the roles each person fulfills, the goals sought, the needs that exist.

—All this is related partly to

the fact that their activity involves them all. It is not an individual or private activity (though it might be interesting to think about how individuals tend to structure their own private activities).

—All this is related also to the fact that this is the world of time and space: the visible world.

A church that was not earthly — not incarnate — might not need structures. But such a church would not be the church of Christians.

In the first place, the Lord in whom Christians profess faith is an incarnate Lord. He was familiar in a firsthand way with the realities of time and space.

In the second place, the people who followed Jesus quickly began to view themselves as a community. Theirs wasn't a private faith, totally individual. They shared it, and felt their life as followers of Jesus was an interdependent life.

While it is not surprising that people pose questions from time to time about the structures in their church, would it be surprising if there were no structures in a visible, incarnate church that takes its community life seriously?

...for discussion

1. Community and institution: two aspects of the church. How are these two aspects of the church related in your life?

2. What are some of the institutions and communities that are part of your life?

3. Do you think it is possible to have a vibrant, enduring community that is not also, in some sense, an institution?

4. What is one way that the institution of the family is like the church, as Joe Michael Feist sees it?

5. Why does Father John Castelot think that the community dimension of church life is so basic?

6. In her article, Katharine Bird says that developing institutions can be a painful and difficult task. Why do you think this is so?

SECOND HELPINGS

"Christian Families in the Real World: Reflections on a Spirituality for the Domestic Church," by Mitch and Kathy Finley. The authors indicate that referring to the family as the "domestic church" points toward an important reality. The Finleys note that "the first form of Christian community in which the person participates is the community of his or her family." The authors call the family "the most basic religious community." The book begins with this thought: "It is not possible to be Christian apart from a community of faith." Even the rare individuals who receive a special call to be hermits remain part of "a human and ecclesial community." (The Thomas More Press, 225 W. Huron, Chicago, Ill. 60610. 1984. \$9.95.)