

Pastoral Governance in the Church

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Every institution has its leaders. But the kind of leadership they exercise and the way they exercise it depends on the kind of institution in question. That is why, before we explore what pastoral governance involves in the Church today, we have to have a clear idea of what is our image of the Church and of leadership in it. I am not going to elaborate here a history of doctrine regarding the Church. For our purpose it is enough to start with the Second Vatican Council.

The Church as the People of God

According to the Second Vatican Council, the Church is basically the 'People of God'. The leaders of the Church are at its service. This supposes a principle of fundamental equality and functional diversity in the Church. The document on the Church recognizes:

“Although by Christ’s will some are established as teachers, dispensers of the mysteries and pastors for the others, there remains, nevertheless, a true equality between all with regard to the dignity and to the activity which is common to all the faithful in the building up of the Body of Christ.”¹

An authoritative commentator remarks:

“From the very intrinsic nature of the Church as the people of God emerge evangelical values like equality, charismatic endowment and co-responsibility from which, as immediate and natural consequence,

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, 32

flows participative and consultative style of pastoral leadership and governance."²

This basic equality supposes that a special function does not confer a special superiority or dignity.³ Rather it is a special responsibility. The statement of St. Augustine is well known:

"or you and for your service I am a bishop; but with you I am a Christian. Bishop is the title of a duty which is entrusted to me; Christian is the name of the grace which I have received."⁴

The Charisms in the Church

Another reason for the fundamental equality of all Christians is the charisms given to all by the Spirit of God. Paul writes to the Corinthians:

"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities but it is the same God who activates all of them in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." (1 Cor. 12:4-7)

It is significant that Paul lists among the charisms apostles, prophets, teachers and leaders. (cf. 1 Cor 12:28) Karambai remarks: "Since both authority and charisms originate from the same Spirit, charisms are not meant to control authority nor authority meant 'to quench the spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to what is good.'"⁵

The Church as Communion

The Church is not merely a human institution, a voluntary organization of people who give themselves leaders whose authority

² Sebastian S. Karambai, *Structures of Decision-Making in the Local Church*. Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2001, p. 40.

³ T. Doyle, *Rights and Responsibilities. A Catholic's Guide to the New Code of Canon Law*. New York, 1983, p. 8, quoted in Karambai, *Structures*, p. 25.

⁴ *Sermo* 340, 1 in *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina*, 38, 1483.

⁵ Karambai, *Structures*, p. 32.

is derived from the consensus of the group. The Church is a communion, which is the Body of Christ, whose soul is the Spirit of God.⁶ God is always an invisible presence when the community is gathered together in God's name. Every one, the leaders as well as the members are subject to and accountable to God. There is no hierarchical structure in which the leaders mediate or come in between God and the people. In the Eastern Churches, the priest prays for the intervention of the Spirit (*epiclesis*), while in the Latin Church the priest claims to represent Christ himself (*in persona Christi*). However this is only a symbolic structure because as St. Augustine has said, when Judas baptizes it is Christ who baptizes. A sense of common responsibility and accountability before God can promote collective listening and discernment, even if the final choice of a group is spelt out or voiced by a leader.

The liturgical-spiritual leader of the community may be chosen by it through an election. But he receives a special charism through the sacrament of ordination. But it is a ministry of animation and service and not domination.

Collegiality and Leadership

While the Eastern Churches are known for their democratic synodal structures, in the Latin Church there has always been a tension between the college and its head. There is no head without the college and no college without the head. So any attempt to isolate the head from the college will be counter-productive. Any authority that the head has is precisely as head of the college. While the head may legally act alone when the college is not there, s/he cannot ignore the college and can act only in communion with the college. Juridical games can be played around this tension. But they are not Christian. It is often said that the Church is not a democracy. It does not have a government of the people, for the people and by the people. It is true

⁶ Cf. Dennis M. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*. Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 2000.

that it is not a majoritarian democracy where a majority decides what is right and wrong. But it is not an autocracy either, where the leader rules with absolute authority in the name of God. The leader exercises his authority only in communion with the college. It could be thought of as a participative and consensual democracy in which all are committed to listen to the Spirit in dialogue with each other and discern the will of God collectively, while the leader declares it in the name of the community.

The Latin Church today has many collegial structures: the Parish Pastoral Council, the Diocesan Pastoral Council, the Presbyteral Council, the Bishops' Conferences and the Synod of Bishops. But all these are carefully defined as having only consultative power, the decision making being reserved to the head. Even when one speaks of co-responsibility, the ultimate responsibility pertains to the head. Karambai, for instance, after saying "The mandate for *common commitment*, which is an immediate corollary of Christian baptism and ecclesial communion, is in other words, called co-responsibility or shared responsibility", hastens to add in a footnote that "the sacred pastors are *ultimately responsible*."⁷ I venture to suggest that this is a juridical rather than a theological arrangement that represents more the letter than the spirit. The term 'sacred' only sacralizes a juridical structure. It is unfortunate that what should have been *collegial* bodies have been reduced to *consultative* ones. We can only hope that a collegial spirit will animate these consultative exercises. Often this does not seem to be the case, if we go by the way in which even the Synod of Bishops is 'managed'. We can only recall the principle here.

Another problem with ecclesiastical authority and leadership is the extension that it assumes in countries like India. In Europe and America today, the authority of a priest or a bishop is limited to the religious sphere. They are not even present very much in the secular

⁷ Karambai, *Structures*, pp. 36-37.

sphere. But in a poor, former colonial and mission country like India the ecclesiastical leadership also claims and enjoys economic, social and even political power. When the people are so dependent then no true collaboration or co-responsibility or even consultation is possible, unless the people in authority make more than ordinary efforts to invite the equal participation of the people. On the other hand the clergy could limit itself to the exercise of religious and spiritual authority, handing over socio-economic and political power to the people and their leaders. In the Eastern Church even the religious authority is divided into the liturgical service fulfilled by the married clergy locally and the teaching and spiritual authority exercised by the monks.

Governance or Leadership.

The Church is on mission to build the Kingdom of God. It is primarily a people's movement rather than an institution. The institution is at the service of the movement. This means that it is always dynamic, forward looking, less weighed down by tradition, and ready for adventure. It is a pilgrim always on the march. It is in eschatological tension between the 'already' and 'not yet' of the Kingdom being realized in history. The term 'governance' refers more to the institutional dimension of the Church, while the Church as a movement in mission will require leadership. While governance supposes power supported by sanctions, leadership demands animation or facilitation actualized by influence and persuasion. In the following reflections I shall focus more on leadership rather than on governance. Governance sounds juridical. Leadership can mean animation, empowerment, facilitation and service. In the past, rulers, civil and ecclesiastic, claimed to rule by divine right. They were accountable to no one except to God. This tendency is not absent in the Church even today, though it has disappeared in the civil sphere. Leadership in the civil sphere today is managerial. A manager is accountable not to the people s/he manages, but to a board of governors or shareholders. Leaders of the Church community do not merely manage it by objectives to produce results. They have to be open to the inspirations and style of the Spirit. They

are accountable to the people they lead collegially and to the Spirit that inspires all of them.⁸

Let me summarize. The Church is the People of God in mission, led collegially by leaders who are called and commissioned to be servants of the community. The community sets them apart and the Spirit gives them a special charism. The function of leadership can be analyzed in terms of the qualities that the leaders should have, the way that their leadership is exercised in the community and the appropriate structures that are necessary. These dimensions of leadership can be explored at various levels: parish, diocese, nation and the world.

Jesus as Leader and Christian Leadership

World history has seen many great leaders. For us Christians, Jesus remains an enduring model of leadership. Analyzing his characteristics as leader, these are the qualities that strike observers.

“Jesus was a man of integrity, who was authentic, generative, compassionate, forgiving and straightforward. As a minister, he listened to people, responded to what he heard, created and communicated a vision, included all in his community, and empowered people and communities to implement that vision.”⁹

Applying this model to Christian leadership the authors go on to say:

“The Christian leader is a person of integrity who is generative, compassionate and who communicates hope and joy. The Christian leader listens to people, creates a vision with those people, responds to the needs of the Christian community, especially the alienated and marginalized, works collaboratively with others in responding to those needs, expands the concept of ministry, and supports the gifts and ministries of the laity and those who influence their values.”¹⁰

⁸ Cf. Kevin Treston, *Creative Christian Leadership*. Mystic: Twenty Third Publications, 1995, pp. 12-14.

⁹ Loughlar Sofield and Donald H. Kuhn, *The Collaborative Leader*. Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1995, p. 40.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

One easy way to complete this paper is just to explain and elaborate this list of characteristics. I shall, however, adopt a different, though, convergent approach. Before we explore the qualities that a Christian leader should have, we should consider the way in which that leadership is exercised.

A Servant Leader

The principal image of leadership that Jesus indicates to us is that of a servant. The story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples is too well known to us to need repetition. After that gesture, Jesus tells his disciples:

“Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” (Jn 13:12-15)

On another occasion, the mother of the sons of Zebedee is seeking special places for her sons in Jesus’ kingdom and the other disciples are upset. Using that opportunity Jesus tells them:

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mt 20:25-28)

The usual human tendency is to associate leadership with power and honour. Power is the ability to dispose of things and persons as one wishes and honour is the desire to be considered and treated as superior to the others. Referring to the teaching and example of Jesus we often say that authority in the Christian community is service. Once a year, on the Thursday of the Holy Week, the clerics ceremoniously

wash the feet of a few chosen people. Otherwise, ecclesial authority in practice becomes a source of power and honour. Sacralized as a share of God's own power, it is considered absolute and tends to become autocratic, since it is accountable to no one. It surrounds itself with trappings of honour. It demands obedience and subservience from the 'subjects'. Leadership, on the contrary, supposes animation of a group of agents.

We need to remind ourselves that real power belongs to God alone. No one can arrogate it to oneself. A call to serve is not a communication of power, but of responsibility. One is responsible before God, because one is called to be at the service of God's mission in the world seeking to bring all things together. One is also responsible before the community, because one is called to animate and empower it to fulfill God's mission. A change of attitude from being a boss to being a servant will go a long way in revitalizing Christian leadership in today's world. A Christian leader does not pretend to be a servant, though s/he is actually the boss. S/he is really a servant. Leadership is a service function in the community, not a title for honour or domination. To politicize it in secular, institutional terms is to lose the Christian reality altogether. Christian leaders are not governors, but servants. They do not govern, but animate, coordinate, facilitate, lead. They are not set above or apart from the community. They are part of it, though they have a special role or function of leadership in it. A person in power commands and demands obedience and threatens punishment. A servant leader discerns the goal together with the team, persuades the people to commit themselves to action and leads by example. This basic attitude must pervade all that we are going to say about the characteristics of leaders and the structures that they have to animate.

Let me now try to spell out the characteristics of a good leader of a Christian community. It is traditional to characterize the Christians in generals and the clergy in particular rapidly as prophet, priest and pastor. I would like to keep this same framework to spell out what I

think are the marks of a good leader in the Christian community, since these are gifts that he shares with the people.

A Prophetic Visionary

The leader must be a person of vision. It is this vision that will orient and animate his and the community's action. It is the vision of the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed and established through his life and paschal mystery. It is a community of freedom, fellowship and justice that does away with every kind of discrimination, inequality and injustice. It respects the dignity of every one and encourages their freedom and creativity in making real a new heaven and a new earth. It has a particular option for the poor and the marginalized; but it is not exclusive and its aim is to gather all things and persons together into one great fellowship. It seeks to reconcile all things and persons with each other and with God. A general image of this vision is given to us in the life, works and words of Jesus, his teachings and his parables.

This vision can serve as a concrete orientation for life and action only when it is set in the context of contemporary life and reality. Using the expertise of the social scientists the leader must be able to understand the world and to analyze its hidden structures, economic and political, personal and social, cultural and religious. He will have to discover the constructive and destructive forces operative in the world. In this context he will have to discern how best to promote the Kingdom and the church-community as its symbol and servant. Correlating the reality of the world with the vision of the Kingdom, he will have to be critical of injustice in the world and in the church and suggest a transformation. He will need the collaboration of every one for this. He has no monopoly either on the vision or on the power of interpretation and discernment or on transformative action. So he will have to listen to every one and read the signs of the times. He will have to spell out together with the community the contours of the new world that we have to make and the concrete steps that we have to take to achieve it – with the help of God. In a dynamic and fast changing world, this vision has to keep changing too.

An Inspiring Guru

We have seen above that the Christian community is not a merely human association. It experiences itself as the body of Christ and animated by the Spirit. It sees itself as linked to the whole cosmos. It is open to the Transcendent who is Immanent. This spiritual dimension is not something added on to it, but is part of its very being. It is the function of the leader to facilitate this spiritual awareness of the community. This spiritual awareness is lived and built up through the sacramental celebrations. These (the sacraments) are symbolic actions of the community. In the Eucharist the community comes together to listen to the word of God, to let the word judge its life, to respond to the word by celebrating community, reconciling with each other and sharing food and drink together in memory of Jesus. Jesus is present in that community in the word. Jesus himself becomes the food and drink that are shared, so that the community becomes the body of Christ. The leader presides over and facilitates this celebration of the community. He prays in the name of the community. In this way all the sacraments are not magic rituals, but celebrations by the community to mark individual and communal "rites of passage". The leader is not set apart and above the community. He is part of it and acts in its name.

The sacraments are not mere mysterious ritual actions. They are symbolic celebrations of the life of the community. When the people in community treat each other as equal and share all that they are and have with each other, then it can celebrate the Eucharist meaningfully. But a community in which there is inequality and injustice and nothing is being done to eradicate them cannot celebrate the Eucharist. If celebrated, it will be meaningless act. The sacredness of the Eucharist depends on the sacredness of life that it symbolizes. The sharing of food and drink as an expression of fellowship enables the community to be in harmony, not only with others, but also with nature. So the Eucharist becomes the symbol of universal harmony. We can understand the sacrament of reconciliation in the same manner. Reconciliation with God is symbolized and realized in our reconciliation

with one another. The spiritual life is not something added on to life in the world. It is only the spiritual dimension of ordinary life in community.

As an animator of the spiritual life of the community, the leader is not simply a functionary. He is not a shaman with some mysterious and magic authority. He is supposed to be a model who embodies the spiritual dimension of the community. He may be called a guru who leads by example. He is not a *sannyasi* who has renounced the world. But he is some one who can show the way to the people and lead them from the front, so to speak. His main function is to be a community animator, though the animation is restricted to the religious sphere. The role of the minister of the sacraments is only a consequence of that.

A Community Builder

The more traditional terms for this third characteristic is 'king' or 'pastor'. Even the title given to me talks of 'pastoral governance'. These terms are institutional and hierarchical. The term 'community animator' may be more appropriate. It indicates someone who is active from within, mediating, reconciling, coordinating, animating, facilitating and promoting relationships and dialogue. There is no sense of power. Any authority he has is moral and spiritual, not political. He brings people together and empowers them. He promotes consultation, participation and co-responsibility. Communication will play a great role to facilitate coordination. He delegates easily. He respects the freedom of the others. He appreciates pluralism of perspectives and programmes. Responsibility goes with transparency and accountability. The leader is accountable, not only to God, but also to the others. Every programme therefore will be evaluated.

Where there is pluralism and freedom, there will be tensions and conflicts. But these can be creative rather than destructive. These would need structures of conflict resolution and reconciliation. Reconciliation supposes the recognition of guilt and the spirit of forgiveness. The leader himself may make mistakes and must be

open to correction. Consensus building through persuasion may be more important than imposition through obedience and sanctions. Trust calls forth trust in response. In a sense the community builds itself up. The leader only facilitates this process.

In any group, the leader may have the privilege of claiming special knowledge that is relevant to decision making. Usually there will be nothing concerning the goals of mission and the ways of achieving it that he cannot share with the others. The only matters that will have to be kept secret will be what concerns the internal forum regarding persons. Otherwise a leader cannot automatically claim any special illumination from the Spirit of God. This need not be excluded. But then others too may have such inspirations.

Collegial Structures

If the Church is primarily the People of God and co-responsibility in discernment, decision making and action, the leader being the animator and servant of this project would be the normal way of procedure, then it must be having collegial bodies at various levels. There are, at the moment, at least in some places, Parish Councils, Priests' Councils, and Diocesan Synods. There are Bishops' Conferences at the national levels. We also have a Synod of Bishops at the level of the universal Church. The Synod of Bishops is today recognized as a collegial body. But it is treated and it functions as a consultative group. Even such consultation is controlled in various ways. The other bodies at lower levels are given only a consultative function. At the moment these bodies seem hardly functional. If the members of such councils are not taken seriously and given true responsibility, they are not going to act responsible either. So the first requirement is that a collegial spirit animates all such councils at every level, whatever be the legal provisions, which are at the moment weighted on the side of the individuals in power.

The collegial character of the various Councils should be complemented by respect for subsidiarity and the practice of delegation.

This means that some one at the higher levels of a hierarchical structure respects the competence, autonomy and agency of people at the lower levels. The functioning of the Councils must follow, not political democratic procedures of lobbying, of majority pressures, and of extraneous influences, but proper procedures of communal discernment. The matter taken for discussion and decision making must be properly studied and analyzed, with the help of experts, if necessary. The proposed alternatives must be exposed clearly with reasons for and against them. There must be free discussion, which should not become emotional or personalized. Then there should be time for a prayerful consideration of the whole issue, seeking the guidance of the Spirit of God. As far as possible a wide consensus must be aimed at. If there are tensions the discernment may be postponed for another time. Even otherwise, a quiet period between discussion and decision making may be advisable. It is then that, based on the procedure, the leader declares a decision. Such a decision will obviously be received well by the group. The leader will not normally change a decision except for very serious reasons. Preferably these reasons should be shared at the appropriate forum, unless it is a matter of the internal forum (conscience), affecting persons, which needs to be kept confidential. As a matter of fact, an atmosphere of confidentiality must characterize even the deliberations and decision-making of the Council.

Implementation of the decisions must also respect the principles of subsidiarity and delegation. It would be useful if the process of implementation is evaluated after an appropriate period.

Conclusion

The Council of Jerusalem, reported in Acts 15, is a good example of collegial decision making and 'pastoral governance'. There were not only apostles, but also James and other elders. They decide 'with the consent of the whole church'. (15:22) They boldly say, "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us". (15:28) The collegial

communities of the early church slowly disappeared with the appearance of the monarchical episcopate. The civil hierarchical structures of the Roman social order slowly invaded the church. The Pope became like the 'emperor' with divine power behind him. Then the monastic communities sought to revive collegial community through their way of life and their 'chapters'. But later, the apostolic congregations, like the Jesuits, resorted to monarchical authority in the name of missionary efficiency. Organizational structures, of course, depend on objectives. Authority and obedience then were spiritualized. Now political attitudes and behaviour have invaded the church as well as the religious congregations. The Basic Ecclesial Community movement in Latin America has even been officially discouraged as a challenge to the hierarchy. It is time that the church discovers itself as community and as a model for human community in the world – even in the socio-political sphere. The poor and the powerless are no longer resigned to their fate and are clamouring for participation at every level. This is true also of the members of religious congregations and of the lay people in the church. Will we rise up to this challenge?