

Participatory Structures in the Church: Are They Functioning?

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Introduction

Even 50 years after the Second Vatican Council, the renewal initiated by the Council has not gained momentum. Participatory structures recommended by the council and instituted by the 1983 Code of Canon Law are not at all functioning in some dioceses or they do not function effectively. This article attempts to analyse the main cause for the non-functioning or malfunctioning of these structures.

1. New Way of Thinking

Pope Paul VI spoke of *novus habitus mentis*, that is, new way of thinking. What is important is not a new way of doing, but a new way of thinking. Without an attitudinal change, mere structural changes will not bear any fruits. This is the bitter experience of many in the post-conciliar period.

The new way of thinking advocated by the Council has not taken root in many of the Christian faithful. We are pouring new wine into old wineskins. Hence the need of the hour is a radical change in our attitude regarding ecclesiology.

What is the Church? What are the obligations of Christ's faithful? What is the nature of participatory structures in the Church? These are the questions which need to be addressed.

2. Ecclesiology of Communion

Ecclesiology of communion is a central and fundamental concept in the documents of Vatican II. The council has invited us to contemplate the mystery of the church as a communion with its inseparable dimensions: the communion of each Christian with Christ and the communion of all Christians with one another. The theology of the church as communion and mission is rooted in the Trinitarian communion and mission (Cf. Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 19).

If the Church is a communion, it leads to mission and the mission itself leads to communion. "Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other, to the point that communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission. Communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion" (*ibid*, 32).

3. Fundamental Equality

The Church is a communion which is called the people of God who are at the same time Christ's faithful. This people of God consist of three groups, namely, the sacred ministers, the religious and the laity. Among these three groups there exists a real fundamental equality with regard to dignity and mission on the basis of their baptism (C. 208). Among Christian faithful, "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer

slave or free, there is no longer male or female, all are one in Christ" (Gal 3:28).

4. Functional Diversity

Even though all the baptized enjoy fundamental equality in the Church, all of them do not have the same function. The functional diversity is characterized in terms of the ordained and the non-ordained. The difference between them is not only in degree but in essence (*LG. 10*).

While speaking about the essential difference between the ordained and the non-ordained, we cannot ignore the charismatic elements in the Church. The Church is both hierarchic and charismatic at one and the same time (*LG. 8*). The same Holy Spirit distributes among Christ's faithful different charismas for the sake of common good (Cf. 1Cor 12:7-10; Rom 12:6-8; 1Pet 4:10-11).

St Augustine brings out the fundamental equality and the functional diversity among the Christian faithful in the following words: "For you I am a bishop, but with you I am a Christian".

It is unfortunate that while some harp on fundamental equality, others swear by functional diversity. For a smooth and healthy functioning of the ecclesial communion and mission, we need to uphold both the fundamental equality and functional diversity. Both the ordained and the laity together constitute the 'People of God' and collaborate in the communion and mission of the Church.

5. Participatory Structures in the Church

There is no room for a democratized Church. The Church is theological reality and not secular government. Its power does not come from the people, but from Christ who entrusted his mission to the Apostolic College with Peter as its head. But the Church can draw certain democratic principles in its governance. The 1983 code of Canon Law does contain certain democratic principle such as: a fundamental equality of all Christians, participation by all in the mission of the church, shared responsibility and consultation.

Vatican II called for the church to set up structures through which people could express their views (LG. 37). Fulfilling the desire of the council, the Code of Canon Law has instituted a number of participatory structures at the diocesan and parish level so that people could express their views in the governance of the Church.

6. The Important Participatory Structures

The important participatory structures are Diocesan Synod (Cc. 460-468); The Council of Priests (Cc. 495-501); College of Consultors (C. 502); Diocesan Pastoral Council (Cc. 511-514); Diocesan Finance Committee (Cc. 492-494); Parish Pastoral Council (C. 536) and Parish Finance Committee (C. 537).

7. Deliberative and Consultative Vote

At times a superior cannot act validly without *consulting* a group or certain specified individuals. At other times, the superior must obtain the consent of a group or individuals in order to act (C. 127). When the consent of a group is required,

the members of the group have a deliberative vote. When the counsel of a group is required, the members have only a consultative vote.

The Superior cannot act against the deliberative vote, but he can always act against the consultative vote. In other words deliberative vote is required for the *validity* of the act, whereas consultative vote is required only for the *liceity* of the act of the superior. Unfortunately the participatory structures are only consultative in nature in most cases.

Even though there is a valid distinction between the deliberative and consultative votes, the distinction should not be pushed too far as to water down the importance of consultative votes. Some superiors tend to act arbitrarily after getting the views of a consultative body, since they are not bound by the counsel. Such superiors should bear in mind the second part of c.127/2 which says that unless there is an overriding reason, the superior is not to act against the consultative vote if it is a unanimous one.

The Bishops are expected to have the spirit of Bishop Cyprian who wrote to his clergy, "From the beginning of my episcopacy, I made up my mind to do nothing on my private opinion, without your advice or without the consent of the people".

The following observation of Hans Küng on the anomaly of being excluded from decision-making while giving advice only is very pertinent to our discussion. "For as long as I can contribute advice and work, but I am excluded from decision-making, I remain a second class member of the community. I am more an object that is utilized than a subject who is actively responsible. The person who can advise and collaborate, but not participate in decision-making in a manner befitting his

status, is not really the Church, but *only belongs* to the Church" (*Participation of the Laity*, pp.87-88).

Pope Pius XII declared years ago that the laity must feel that they not only belong to the Church, but they are the Church. "The faithful, more precisely the lay faithful, find themselves on the frontlines of the Church's life; for them the Church is the animating principle for human society. Therefore, they in particular ought to have an ever-clear consciousness *not only of belonging to the Church, but of being the Church*, that is to say, the community of the faithful on earth under the leadership of the Pope, the head of all and of Bishops in communion with him. *These are the Church*" (Quoted by Pope John Paul II in *Christifideles Laici*, 9).

If the views of the laity are not taken seriously, especially when expressed through consultative bodies, how can they not only belong to the Church, but they are the Church? They will feel that they are mere objects utilized and not subjects. They will feel that they are only numbers not members of the Church. Hence the Church authorities are to take seriously the opinions voiced by the laity especially through the participatory structures such as the Diocesan Pastoral Council and the Diocesan Finance Committee, the Parish Pastoral Council and the Parish Finance Committee. The Code of Canon Law has given a very valid pastoral norm in c.119/3: "that which affects all individuals must be approved by all". Hence wider consultation is required in matters which touch upon the life and mission of all the faithful.

8. Acknowledge and Promote

While c. 129/2 states that the lay faithful can co-operate in the exercise of the power of governance in accordance

with law, c. 275/2 states that clerics are to acknowledge and promote the mission of the laity in the Church and in the world. C. 529/2 makes a special appeal to parish priests to recognize and promote the specific role which the laity have in the mission of the Church.

It is high time that the *Diocesan Bishop and Parish Priests treat the laity as matured people, capable of giving the needed opinions for the governance of the Diocese and of the Parish especially through the consultative bodies. If they fail to do so, they do so at their own peril.*

9. On the Part of the Laity

The laity, to a large extent, are not much interested in participating in the mission of the Church. Most are satisfied with, 'praying, paying and obeying'. They are very lethargic and indifferent.

On the other hand, in some places a few handful of the laity who play somewhat an active role in the governance of the Church have inherited a clerical mentality. They try to dominate the clergy and do not allow other lay faithful to enter into their circle. In some dioceses the Church administration is completely controlled by the laity and the Parish Priest has become a non-entity. Pope John Paul II has warned against "the tendency towards a clericalization of the lay faithful and the risk of creating, in reality, an ecclesial structure of parallel service to that founded on the Sacrament of Orders" (Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 23).

10. Servant Model

One of the new ways of thinking of Vatican II is the emphasis laid on 'authority as Service'. Every authority in the Church can be justified only in so far as it is given by Christ to serve the people of God; Christ came "not to be served but to serve" (Mk 10:45).

Unless and until the sacred ministers are implied with the spirit of the 'Servant Model of the Church', they will not allow the real participation of the laity in the decision-making process of the Church. Authority is intoxicating and absolute power is absolutely intoxicating.

It is not a question of either the hierarchy or the laity should be in charge of the governance of the Church, but it is a question of both the hierarchy and the laity. Not the domination of any one group, but it is a combination of both groups that is needed. This needs a true conversion of heart for a new way of thinking both on the part of the hierarchy and on the part of the laity.

Conclusion

If the participatory structures in the Church were to become operative and effective, the following considerations are to be taken seriously:

- i. What is required is not a new way of doing, but a new way of thinking. Without a change of attitudes, change of structures will be a futile exercise.
- ii. The new way of thinking advocated by Vatican II includes some of the following elements:
 - a. The Church is communion and mission.

- b. In the community of the People of God, all enjoy fundamental equality even though a legitimate functional diversity is recognized.
 - c. All Christ's faithful share, in their own way, in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ.
 - d. The laity not only belong to the Church but they are the Church.
 - e. The opinions expressed in the consultative bodies are to be taken seriously by the pastors. The difference between deliberative and consultative vote is not to be insisted to the extent of watering down shared responsibility in the process of decision-making.
- iii. All Christian faithful, especially the hierarchy need to realize that authority in the Church is service.

Let us humbly implore Christ's grace for a new way of thinking, that is, for an attitudinal change. Let us give due importance to the participatory structures in the Church according to both the letter and the spirit of the Code of Canon Law which is the fruit of the new ecclesiology of Vatican II. Let us pray with Bartimaeus, the blind man of Jericho, "My teacher, let me see again" (Mk 10:51).

(Endnotes)

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