

Collegial Sharing in Ministry

by Cardinal John Dearden

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION:

The following article represents excerpts from Cardinal John Dearden's address to the assembly of U.S. Catholic Bishops who met at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota for a week of "prayer and reflection on episcopal ministry" during June of 1982. Cardinal Dearden served as a member of the doctrinal commission that prepared the draft for the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World during Vatican Council II. He was also elected the first president of the U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1966. Now retired, Cardinal Dearden was Archbishop of Detroit from 1958 to 1980. This version is excerpted from the original paper first published in Origins, NC Documentary Service, Vol. 12, No. 8.

IMAGES OF THE CHURCH

When we come to speak of church and our understanding of it in faith, we encounter one of the central issues of the Second Vatican Council. In his introductory talk at the opening of the second session of the council, Pope Paul VI said:

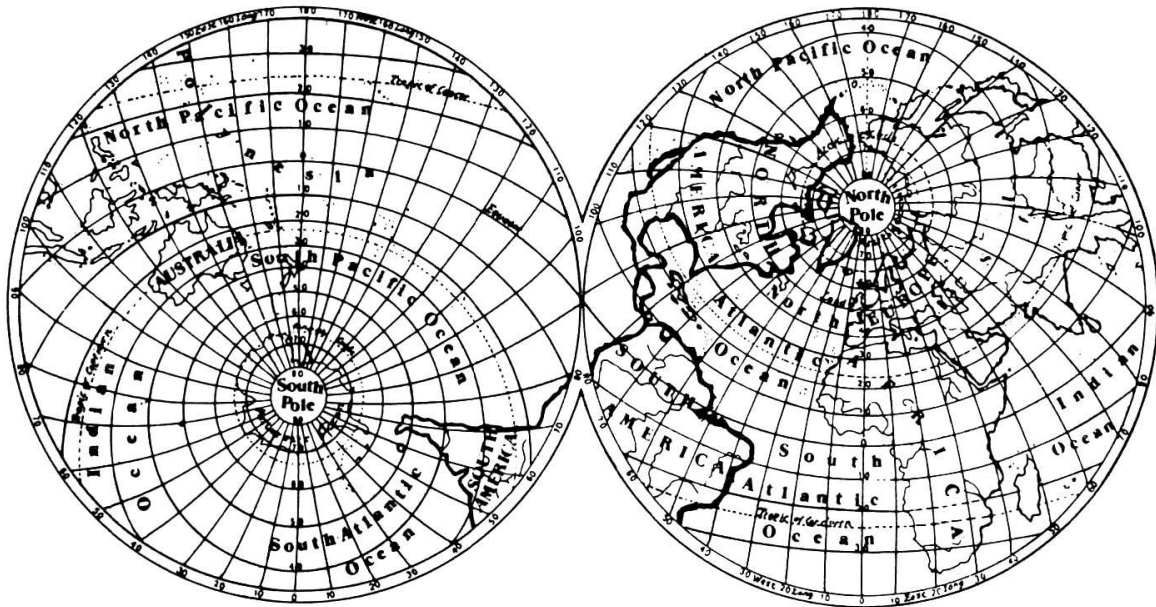
"The time has now come, we believe, when the truth regarding the church of Christ should be examined, coordinated and expressed. The expression should not, perhaps, take the form of a solid dogmatic definition, but of declarations making known by means of the church's magisterium, in a more explicit and authoritative form, what the church considers herself to be."¹

When the original schema of the preparatory commission was set aside as inadequate, a new orientation was called for. And as is commonly the case, it was easier to discard the old than to formulate the new. Ultimately it was done. But few realize the cost - then and in these intervening years - and too few appreciate its effects.

Church, in the traditional institutional sense, is still dominant in the thinking of many. The reality is that with all its limitations it is easier to grasp than the more refined, highly nuanced image that has come to the fore in recent times. The newer understanding is like a succession of images rather than a sharply focused pattern. What underlies the issue, of course, is the rich complexity of the church itself, a communion, a kind of sacrament, a mystery imperfectly represented in a series of images. And yet the richness of this new understanding and its fidelity to the gospel message make it imperative that it become an integral part of our people's understanding of church.

Our vision of church must not be too complicated and structural. It is, of course, an institution. But it did not begin there. That emerged, clearly as a response to Christ's will. We start with a "community of believers"² or, to use a formulation of Father Avery Dulles with a scriptural basis, a community of disciples.³ Its internal principle of unity is a common faith shared through the action of the Spirit. Its outward unity is expressed and identified by the presence of the shepherd, the bishop. In the familiar expression of St. Cyprian: "You must know that the bishop is in the church and the church in the bishop."⁴

The point of departure for our vision of church is the local (or particular) church. It is in this that we grasp more accurately the nature of the universal church (the *catholica*) and our role as bishops in that church.



To grasp more accurately the nature of the universal church.

THE LOCAL CHURCH AND THE "CORPUS ECCLESIARUM"

Historically there has been in the church a tendency to diminish the status of the local church. In its most common form it has held that the church should be considered as a body of universal extension in which the particular congregations were sort of members and the church of Rome the head. This understanding has sometimes reached the extreme of viewing the universal church as a single diocese presided over by the pope. This view of church has long been dominant in popular thought. Many people, without using theological terms, would tend to think of it as a central office with branch offices called dioceses.

It was in the council that the place of the local church was reaffirmed: "Particular churches...are constituted after the model of the universal church; it is in these and formed out of them that the one and unique Catholic Church exists."⁵ Some authors have referred to this renewed emphasis on the local church as a Copernican revolution in modern ecclesiology.⁶

The local church is then not seen as a fraction of a whole. Each local church is in reality the church of Christ - possessed of a common faith and eucharist, all the means of salvation given by Christ to his people. Paul, in addressing the communities in Corinth, did not refer to them as "the church of Corinth" but "the church of God which is in Corinth."⁷

For the local church is a true community. In that community the role of the bishop is to foster this communion in the true faith and with the eucharist. In a similar fashion the universal church is related to the Holy Father, who as bishop of the local church of Rome has a special responsibility for the communion of all local churches. He it is that safeguards unity of faith and discipline.

This understanding of the local church - and the role of the bishop who presides over it - in no way diminishes the indispensable reality of the universal church, willed as it is by Christ, nor the role of the Holy Father as Peter's successor. What it does is to restore in our thinking the inherent dignity and completeness, in faith and sacrament, of the particular church. The local church is not seen as a fragment or piece of a whole, but as a community of faith having its own integrity even as it relates to the universal church. At the same time the *catholica* is not seen as the sum of many parts nor as a federation of autonomous bodies. The Trinitarian image of circumincision allows us to conceive of distinctness within a unity that is full and complete.

Parenthetically, this concept of local church related to the *catholica* gives us an insight into something that appears new to many Catholics, namely, pluralism among the local churches within the framework of essential unity. When each local church is properly seen as an integral realization of "church," then pluralism within unity becomes a sign of strength, not a sign of weakness. Each local church with its uniqueness adds to the richness of the *catholica*.

This vision of the local church in its relationship to the universal church - as well as the reverse - expresses well the communion that is the church. With Christ as its head⁸ we see it as a faith-inspired community nurtured by the sacraments and especially the eucharist. Its internal unity comes from the action of the Holy Spirit, externally the unity is expressed by the role of the Holy Father for the universal church and the bishop for the local church.⁹

COLLEGIALITY AND THE "CORPUS EPISCOPORUM"

The bonding that holds together the church community shows forth as well in the special ties that unite the bishops of the church, including the Holy Father. The body of bishops, the college, expresses a special kind and degree of interrelationship. In its totality the bishops of the church today have succeeded in their pastoral office to

the role of the apostles in the early church.¹⁰ As Peter was head of the apostles by Christ's will, so is the Holy Father, Peter's successor, head of the body of bishops.

Ordination to the episcopacy entails sacramental insertion into the college of bishops. There is a link between sacramentality and collegiality. The rite has traditionally called for the presence of co-consecrators - two at least - in the ceremony. The presence of these co-consecrators is not had in order to offer additional assurance of the validity of the rite. It is instead an evidence of the fact, as attested to in the *Traditio Apostolica* (Hippolytus), that episcopal ordination associates the new bishop to the *ordo episcoporum* represented by these bishops. Through the sacramental action of ordination the bishop receives the traditional powers of the office whose exercise in the precise words of *Lumen Gentium* entails hierarchical communion with the head and members of the college.

As this point I do not think it necessary or useful to develop the concept of collegiality as it is set forth in Chapter 3 of *Lumen Gentium*. This is well known to you. My approach to this fundamental doctrine through some emphasis on the local church and its bishop in relationship to the *catholica* is designed to underscore the dynamic dimension of this doctrine, to see it not as a static table-of-organization concept but as an interrelationship, with full awareness of the subordination to the Holy Father, that offers fruitful ground for a rich collegial sharing in pastoral mission. In reality the collegiality of the bishops is related to the collegial bonding of the local churches.

In its essential lines the college of bishops - and the Holy Father as its head is one of them - constitutes a communion "in a bond of unity, charity and peace"¹¹ for the good of the entire church. Its fullest expression, of course, is in an ecumenical council. But in recent years a new effort has been put forth, inspired by the council, to achieve collegial collaboration on a more continuing basis. Pope John Paul II reflects on this in his encyclical letter *Redemptor Hominis*:

"The council did more than mention the principle of collegiality: It gave it immense new life, by - among other things - expressing the wish for a permanent organ of collegiality, which Paul VI founded by setting up the Synod of Bishops...

"The principle of collegiality showed itself particularly relevant in the difficult postconciliar period, when the shared unanimous

position of the college of bishops - which displayed, chiefly through the synod, its union with Peter's successor - helped to dissipate doubts and at the same time indicated the correct ways for renewing the church in her universal dimension."¹²

I have quoted at some length from the encyclical because it makes clear the desire and intention of the Holy Father to use the Synod of Bishops expressly as an instrument of collegial activity. This suggests the importance of seeing the synod as a channel of communication in two directions. Though the synod has not the character of an ecumenical council, it offers a vehicle for fruitful exchange. This means, therefore, that the bishops' conference must be prepared to insert its thinking into the process as well as to profit from the insights and experience of others. In this context it is worth noting that concern for the internationalization of the Curia was identified as something to be pursued in order to permit bishops to bring to the attention of the Holy Father the needs and desires and concerns of the dioceses.¹³

While I have until now placed much emphasis on the local church in its relationship to the *catholica* and on the bishop in his role to the local church, it is timely, following the lead of *Lumen Gentium*, to speak briefly of the responsibility of the bishop to the universal church as well. It is too easy - and theologically incorrect - for a bishop to feel that his duties focus entirely on the church community given into his care. It is a subtle kind of self-deceit to hide behind the press of local responsibilities and to ignore one's role as a member of the college of bishops to the universal church.

In a very strict sense *Lumen Gentium* identifies a dimension of responsibility here. "The order of bishops is the successor to the college of the apostles in their role as teachers and pastors, and in it the apostolic college is perpetuated. Together with their head, the supreme pontiff, and never apart from him, they have supreme and full authority over the universal church, but this power cannot be exercised without the agreement of the Roman pontiff."¹⁴

Interestingly enough this principle is not new to Vatican II. It is in full accord with Vatican I and in a very profound way it affirms the *communio* that exists of the Holy Father with the bishops and the bishops with the Holy Father. Certainly the power affirmed for the college is not continually exercised.¹⁵ But this does not diminish the reality of the college. What is referred to here is one supreme power in the church. It is a power that may be exercised in two different

ways. To put the matter in theological terms: What we have here is a twofold subject - inadequately distinct - of supreme pastoral power. The first subject (the pope) is at the same time part or member of the second (the college).¹⁶ Some theologians such as Karl Rahner would say that when the pope exercises supreme power he does so in his role as head of the episcopal college. The council did not enter into these theological refinements.

The fact that each bishop in his role as a member of the college has the traditional powers of teaching, sanctifying and shepherding brings with it a responsibility to be concerned about the universal church. It is his task to see to it that the local church over which he presides is open to the church throughout the world. The community of disciples locally must be aware of it as were the members of the Pauline community in the apostolic church.

Even as the bishop is concerned that individual communities (parishes) not close in upon themselves in a form of narcissism, so he must be involved in helping his diocese be conscious of its relationship and responsibility to the church everywhere. The needs of any - whether of personnel, material concerns, etc. - are the needs of all. This is the implication of discipleship in the one church of Christ. A community unconcerned about the needy in its midst would be wanting in unity. Note Luke's comment on an ideal community: "Nor was there anyone needy among them" (Acts 4:34). It must be a sharing community.

Nothing could be more at odds with sound episcopal ministry than a want of concern over what happens outside the local church. The bishop who wraps his church about him like a cloak to shelter him from the winds of change and ferment that occur outside is underestimating the obligations he assumed when through ordination he became a member of the college of bishops. Whatever his other duties, he may not be deaf to the needs of other churches nor may he fail to offer that "collegial collaboration"¹⁷ which must mark ministry in our time.

Whatever uncertainties the past may have held are now dispelled by the Second Vatican Council. Not only are bishops of a nation allowed to gather to share common pastoral concerns, they are strongly encouraged to do it. The immediate motive is the collegial good-will; the deeper reality is the obligation that each bishop through his ordination has for the concerns of the church beyond the limits of his own diocese. And the at-hand instrument to live out this obligation in his own nation is the episcopal conference. For this reason the structure is to be seen as a positive aid in meeting divinely given responsibilities. Out of my

own experience as a bishop who has attended meetings since 1948, I can applaud the readiness with which the American bishops have accepted and endeavored to live out the directions set by the council. Our conference has not always been seen as positively as it has in recent years.

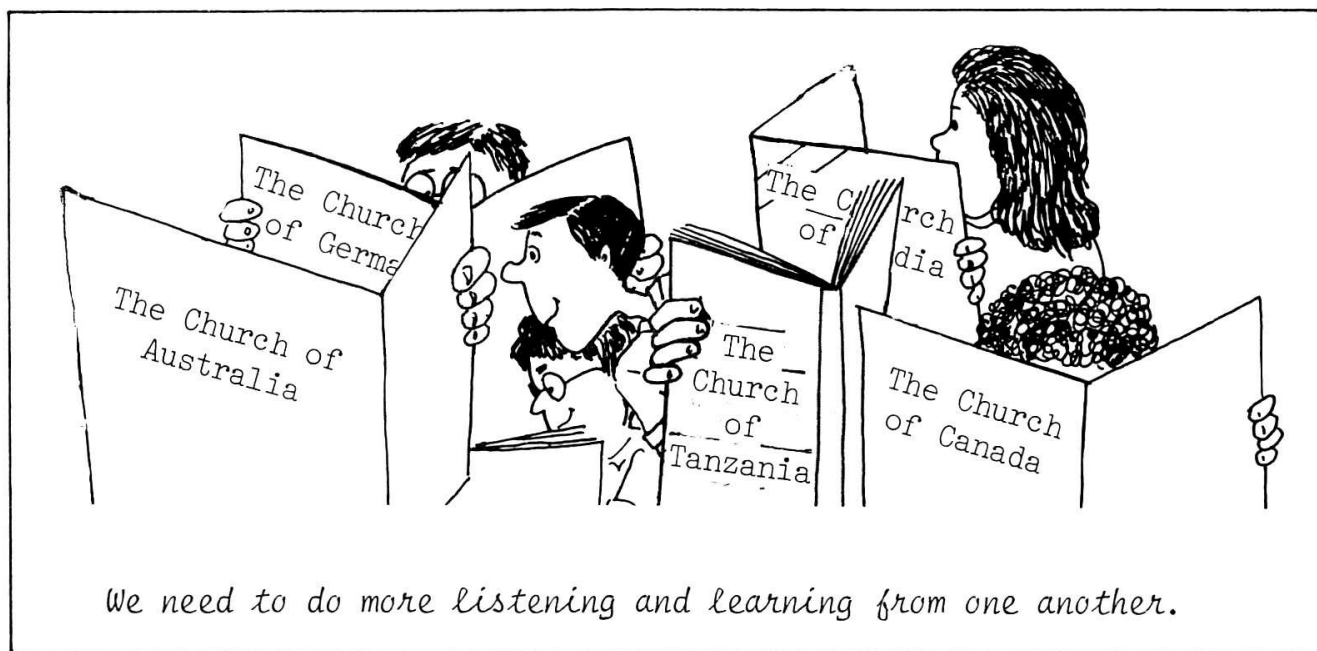
What is worth noting is the fact that the episcopal conference is not a structure intermediate between the local church and the universal church. The will of Christ - divine law - has brought into being these essential components of church, local and universal. On the analogy of the Eastern churches, it is divine providence that is to be credited with the formation of the conference. It does not fall in the direct line between the local church and the *catholica*. It is to be seen rather as an auxiliary instrument to the side of the two. In no way is a bishop as answerable in his ministry to the conference as he is to the universal church. But conversely, the conference is not to be seen as an option that may on whim be dispensed with.

How then does such an instrumentality fit into a bishop's conception of his pastoral responsibilities? Essentially, I believe, it is an important, though not exclusive, channel through which he can meet some of his divinely given concerns for the church throughout the world. What he can do alone can be of value. What he can do with his immediate confreres working together "by common agreement and united effort"¹⁸ is far greater.

The endeavor profits from the exchange of information, of reflective planning and of concerted action. Ideas can be refined, programs made more effective and an indispensable element of mutual support and reinforcement can offer its measure of assurance. Confidence in the soundness of a course of action can be fostered through shared discussion. In a practical way a bishop is more fully conscious of his role as representing Christ to his people when he sees the image of Christ shining forth in his neighbors.

Let us not overlook the lessons of history. They tell us much about the church. The mystery of Christ, which we attempt to express through the church, transcends all our efforts to capture it in words, symbols and structures. It is evident that the New Testament churches learned much from one another. We find it easy to understand how this might be at an early stage of the church. The Christian communities had only just begun to live out the message of the Gospel and the experience of one another comparing notes, if you will, was most helpful. The same should be true today. It is not as though in these nearly 2,000

years we have exhausted the riches of the mystery of church and can now draw up a blueprint for the perfect local church everywhere in the world. When we stand before such a mystery, even 20 centuries later, we can still say, "We have only just begun."



We need to do more listening and learning from one another. I have felt this to be one of the weaknesses of the church, not only here in the United States, but elsewhere in the world. Our coming together through the instrumentality of our conference here at Collegeville for an extended period and with a format that allows for a great deal of informal exchange can be a significant step toward addressing that weakness. We can listen and learn from one another. Listening and learning can enrich our understanding of the church.

THE CHURCH LIVING IN CHRIST, ITS HEAD

Through these pages I have touched briefly on many themes. This is the way I have conceived of my assignment. But out of the kaleidoscopic pattern one clear unity must emerge and stand forth: our faith understanding of church and our love of the institution through which Christ's saving will for us and for our people comes alive. The church for us is not an abstraction. It is the living reality of Christ's presence in our world, a community of faith and charity; or in Tillard's words, "The church is a communion with God and communion to God in the body of the risen Lord and through the Holy Spirit."¹⁹ In it we see our

role as bishops as his special representatives: to effect unity and achieve communion. The bishop, too, links his local church with the other churches. Collegiality is an expression of the *communio* that binds the bishops together. And in that *communio* the church of Rome presided over by the Holy Father is "a lasting and visible source and foundation of unity both of faith and communion." 20

This vision of the bishop's role underscores the living, warm, loving, faith-inspired relationship that he has with his people. And it characterizes as well the nature of his ties with all other bishops of the church. The title "vicar of Christ" is pre-eminently that of the Holy Father. But it is good to recall that in an earlier Christian age that same title "vicar of Christ" was given to the bishop of a local church. And the reason is clear. By virtue of his office the bishop stands as Christ ministering in word and sacrament in the midst of his people even as the Holy Father does for the universal church. It is truly the living church of Christ.

This understanding of our role to people and to our colleagues in the episcopacy makes our sense of church something very central in our lives. The church is for us a unique reality, the sacrament of Christ - truly a mystery - that grips and holds us in bonds of loving service. Conscious as we are of all the human limitations and flaws that mark her, we are at the same time aware of her mission in Christ's plan. And we love her and spend our lives in her service because she mediates Christ to us in the Spirit.

On this note, I bring these reflections to a close and as a fitting conclusion I will make my own some thoughts on the church so beautifully expressed by Father de Lubac, SJ. I can read these few sentences to you. But I cannot find words to convey the impact of this "Meditation on the Church" in the setting in which it was given in the spring of 1966 shortly after the close of the council.

"How can I encompass and understand this church? The more I try to come to terms with her, the more I put aside the erroneous ideas about her, the more her profound truth bursts before my eyes - the less I know how to define her. Should I ask her own definition of herself, she speaks to me with a profusion of images drawn from her ancient Bible, which are not, I know very well, simple pedagogical illustrations, but rather allusions to a reality that will always remain blurred at its center for my natural intelligence. Yes, even after she answers me as she has never done before, with a special effort of logical and precise

clarity in this constitution *Lumen Gentium*, when I begin to meditate about her I plunge into a mystery whose obscurity lingers on.

"My eyes, however, have not deceived me. They revealed something to me, prior to any reflection and confirmed by every reflection. This

The Church is my mother



something I can sum up in a word, the simplest, the most childlike, the first of all words: The church is my mother. Yes, the church, the whole church: that of the past generations which handed on her life to me, her teachings, her example, her mores, her love; and that of today, the whole church, not only the official church, or the teaching church or, as we still say, the hierarchical church, the church that holds the keys the Lord entrusted to her, but, more broadly, more simply, 'the living church' - the church that works and prays, acts and meditates, remembers and searches; the church that believes, hopes, loves; that in the thousand and one situations of existence weaves visible and invisible links among its members; the church of the humble, those near to Christ, a sort of secret army recruited from everywhere, enduring even during periods of decadence, dedicating itself and sacrificing itself, with no idea of revolt or reform, climbing unceasingly the slope that is our wounded nature, a silent witness that the Gospel is always fruitful and that the kingdom is already among us.²¹

FOOTNOTES

(1) Council Daybook: Vatican II. Sessions 1 and 2, (1962-3) NCWC: p. 146.

(2) Acts 4:32.

(3) Avery Dulles, SJ, "Images of the Church for the 1980s," Catholic Mind, LXXIX (Nov. 1981), pp. 8-26 (cf. p. 14 sqq.).

(4) Cyprian, Ep. n. 66, 8 (cited Congar, Y.: Ministères et Communion Ecclésiastique, (Paris, Cerf. 1971) p. 96).

(5) Lumen Gentium, 23.

(6) Cf. D.E. Lanne, "L'Eglise locale et l'Eglise universelle," Irenikon XLIII (1970) pp. 481-511 (p. 490).

(7) 1 Cor. 1:1; also 2 Cor. 1:1.

(8) Cf. LG, 7.

(9) Cf. LG, 23.

(10) Cyprian's expression: (episcopi) "qui apostolis vicaria ordinatione succedunt" Epis. 65.

(11) LG, 22 (trans. Flannery, Vatican Council II (New York, 1975) p. 374).

(12) Encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II, Redemptor Hominis, 5.

(13) Cf. Christus Dominus, 10.

(14) LG, 22.

(15) Cf. LG, Nota Praevia, 4.

(16) Cf. G. Philips, L'Eglise et Son Mystère. (Paris, Desclée, 1968), I, p. 287.

(17) Redemptor Hominis, 5.

(18) CD, 18.

(19) J.M.R. Tillard, OP, "The Church of God Is a Communion, The Ecclesiological Perspective of Vatican II," (unpublished manuscript) n.d., pp. 6-7.

(20) LG, 18.

(21) De Lubac, H., SJ, "Meditation on the Church," published in Vatican II, An Interfaith Appraisal: International Theological Conference (Notre Dame, 1966) p. 260.