

From Council to Conference: A Brief Survey

by John E. Lynch

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The practice of church leaders--by the second century known as bishops--assembling to resolve problems of faith and discipline is almost as old as Christianity itself. From the so-called "Apostolic Council" related in the fifteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles up to the episcopal conferences in the post-Vatican era, it has been recognized that a common course of action is often necessary to protect ecclesial unity. Depending on the importance of the issue at stake, the desired unity must be universal, such as a profession of faith in the divinity of Christ, or at least regional, for example, in the observance of holy days.



During the centuries when Christianity was a persecuted religion, bishops could assemble only in regional groupings. The first recorded synods or councils occurred in Asia Minor about the year 175 to deal with the Montanists, an elitist faction of spirituals given to outbursts of prophesying about the end-time. A second series of meetings from Lyons (in what is now France) to Mesopotamia (beyond the eastern frontiers of the empire) sought unsuccessfully to achieve uniformity in the celebration of Easter. Another problem to agitate the early Church was the validity of baptism administered by heretics. Again unanimous agreement failed due to the negative stance taken by the rigorists of the African communities. The rigorists also proved to be an obstacle in setting a consistent policy for the reinstatement of Christians who had abandoned the faith in the face of persecution.

Once the Emperor Constantine had solidified his control over the

whole Roman Empire and had legalized Christianity, it became possible to have all the bishops of the church assemble together. At the insistence of Constantine and his successors, empire-wide or ecumenical councils were convened to deal with clerics propagating unorthodox teachings about the Godhead and Christ. The assembled bishops took advantage of the occasion to enact laws, known as canons, regulating ecclesiastical organizations and standards of conduct expected of the clergy and laity. By the year 787 seven ecumenical councils were recognized by both the Western churches and the Greek Orthodox or Byzantine churches in the East. (Certain communities in Egypt, Ethiopia, Syria, Armenia, and the Malabar Coast of India accepted only the first two or three of these councils.)

Even outside the Roman Empire to the East, Christian churches functioned in a conciliar manner. The Persian church, the most important of these, governed itself much as the churches of the empire, even though for political reasons contacts with them were minimal. Due to the hostility between the Persian King of Kings and the Roman Emperors, Persian Christians found it expedient to declare a kind of autocephaly. A Persian synod of 424 decreed "Easterners shall not complain of their own patriarch to the Western patriarch. Any case that cannot be settled by him shall await the tribunal of Christ."¹ Yet a general Persian synod in 410 accepted the decisions of the first ecumenical council. The Armenian church also adopted the conciliar model as it had developed in the Byzantine empire and held national synods at Ashtishat. The Armenians gradually became more independent until at Ctesiphon in 640 they refused to recognize the fourth ecumenical council.

Throughout the medieval period councils continued to be convened, with their frequency, however, largely determined by political stability. Up until the eleventh century Europe was buffeted by successive waves of invasions by the various Germanic tribes, the Norsemen, and the Saracens. Giovanni Mansi, an eighteenth-century historian, published a collection of enactments of councils up to the year 1440 which filled thirty-one massive volumes. Succeeding scholars have extended the collection, bringing it down to the nineteenth century with a total of sixty volumes.

The influence of synodical rule in ecclesiastical affairs declined as the Western church became more highly centralized in administration under the direction of the pope, the bishop of Rome. With the loss of Egypt and Syria in the Islamic conquests, the bishop or patriarch of Constantinople became the dominant ecclesiastic in the East. His prestige was greatly enhanced with the conversion of the Balkans, Russia,

and the Caucasus to Christianity. He normally ruled with a "permanent synod," convened as occasion arose from the bishops of the neighborhood of Constantinople and of visiting bishops. The turmoil following the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 and the Protestant Reformation in Western Europe further curtailed conciliar activity.

With the increased tempo of modern times, the occasional assemblies of bishops proved inadequate to meet the needs of the Church. The French Revolution, unlike its American counterpart, was inspired by an irreligious and anticlerical spirit. When the state was not overtly hostile to the Church, it pursued a policy of strict neutrality or non-cooperation in such vital concerns as education. Ecclesiastics in the formerly Catholic countries of Europe found it extremely difficult to adjust to the new environment.

In Belgium the archbishop of Malines in the interval between the 1830 revolution and the adoption of 1831 constitution summoned the bishops of the province to take counsel in a series of meetings. These gatherings which were continued on an annual basis proved to be the beginning of the episcopal conference.² To accord it some evident structure, the Belgian bishops approved a set of statutes in 1842.

The example of the Belgian hierarchy was soon followed in other countries. Hardly had order been restored after the revolution of 1848, when the German episcopate held its first general meeting at Wurzburg, a practice carried down to the present, but since 1869 located at Fulda. The assemblies were not to be considered councils or synods, as the Standing Orders of the Fulda meeting declared, but a means of enhancing charity and unity among the bishops, an opportunity to explore ways for the better fulfillment of their responsibilities.³

In Austria almost overnight the church lost its privileged position during the March Days of 1848. The bishops of the ecclesiastical province of Salzburg six months later addressed a petition to the parliament in Vienna seeking guarantees of freedom in teaching, worship and ecclesiastical government. In 1849 all the bishops of Austria met in Vienna, and, at length, succeeded in negotiating a concordat or treaty with the government. The bishops met periodically after 1856 to look after the best interests of the church.

The episcopal conference, initially occasioned by the revolutions of the mid-nineteenth century, proved so useful for improving the general condition of religion and ecclesiastical discipline that they soon received the encouragement of the popes.⁴ Pius IX in 1864 approved the decision

of the bishops of Bavaria to meet annually. Leo XIII wrote to the bishops of Brazil in 1894 urging them to assemble as frequently as distance and their local responsibilities would allow. He wrote similar instructions to Spain, Portugal and Hungary. During his reign episcopal conferences were also fostered in China and in India.⁵ By the time of Pius X these non-conciliar meetings had become so regular that he could use phrases such as "the annual meeting" or the "customary meeting." In 1913 he wrote to the bishops of Switzerland congratulating them on their fiftieth annual assembly. In a letter to the bishops of Bavaria he described their meetings as advantageous "for promoting helpful studies, for providing suitable and timely remedies to combat a growing irreligion and for achieving the closest agreement of purpose and action that the age requires."⁶

Pope Pius XII in 1951 published an encyclical letter on the promotion of missions. In it he referred to the good that has come from conferences of bishops in mission lands. At these meetings "successful projects which the bishops singly have learned from experience are pooled for the common good, and ideas leading to the adoption of more telling and skillful apostolic methods are exchanged." Their collaboration in furthering the faith has enhanced the esteem of the Christian religion in the eyes of civil officials and non-Catholics.⁷

Up to this point episcopal conferences have been distinguished from regional or national conferences by their regularity and their emphasis on consultation and collaboration rather than on legislation in the strict sense. A later characteristic would be the element of permanence as evidenced by a continuing secretariat and stable commissions.

To this development the church in the United States made a significant contribution. During the nineteenth century the entire hierarchy met on ten occasions, the last time in 1884.⁸ Thereafter, the only unified episcopal activity consisted in an annual meeting of the dozen or so archbishops beginning in 1890. The gatherings served merely an unofficial consultative purpose. The entry of the United States into World War I in April 1917, however, made immediately apparent the necessity for collaboration on the national level to care for the spiritual, social and recreational needs of the one million Catholics called to serve their country in the military forces. The National Catholic War Council under the supervision of the archbishops was formed to coordinate these welfare activities and was officially recognized by the United States government.⁹

The experience of national cooperation proved so positive that after

the war, in September 1919, the American bishops constituted the National Catholic Welfare Council (later changed to Conference) which would meet once a year. Between the general sessions an elected administrative committee or board of bishops would transact business. The committee in turn was to appoint an executive secretary to conduct the day-to-day activities at a headquarters in Washington, D.C.¹⁰

Responsibility for the ongoing work of the Council was divided among several offices. The Department of Education was to study the problems and conditions which affect the operation and development of Catholic schools. The Department of Social Welfare was to "coordinate those activities which aim at improving social conditions." The Department of Press and Literature, to systematize publications; the Department of Societies and Lay Activities, to "secure a more thoroughly unified action" among Catholic organizations.¹¹ The NCWC, therefore, was to act as an information clearing house, issue pamphlets on social and educational issues, attend congressional hearings, maintain a news service for its constituents, and establish relationships with other national and international organizations.¹²

Even though the subheading on its stationery was "The Hierarchy of the United States," the NCWC had no canonical standing or authority.¹³ The attendance of the bishops at the annual meeting as well as their cooperation with the various programs and policies was purely voluntary. There was, furthermore, some ambiguity about the name "The National Catholic Welfare Council." It was used interchangeably for the annual meeting of all the bishops, the administrative board of bishops, and the permanent secretariat with its departments. Not appreciating the merely consultative nature of the organization with regard to the individual bishops and the Holy See, the public at large and the government would perceive all statements emanating from the NCWC as the official voice of the American bishops.

Perhaps because of this confusion as well as the fear of a national bureaucracy impinging upon the authority of the bishop within his own diocese, or more likely (it was charged) because of their inability to dominate the organization, two American cardinals secretly persuaded Rome to suppress the NCWC through a decree promulgated February 25, 1922.¹⁴ Immediately a petition to have the decree rescinded was circulated among the American bishops and signed by ninety percent of them. The appeal was successful and on July 4, 1922, a new Roman document permitted the organization to continue with a recommendation that the term "council" in the title be changed to "committee." The bishops, however, preferred the title "The National Catholic Welfare Conference."

The term "welfare" going back to the war years was borrowed from the emerging profession of social work and adapted "to embrace a broad range of public concerns, including child welfare and education, industrial relations, immigration, and housing, as well as the new interest in social case work."¹⁵

The NCWC exerted an effective influence on the national scene up until its reorganization after Vatican II. A detailed policy statement entitled "Social Reconstruction: A General Review of the Problems and Survey of the Remedies" was issued by the administrative committee in 1919. Eleven of the proposals eventually became federal law under the New Deal of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The general secretary of the NCWC was often consulted by President Roosevelt and other government leaders.¹⁶

After World War I France inaugurated a limited conference which in time became similar to the one in the United States. In 1919 the archbishops of France formed l'Assemblée des Cardinaux et Archevêques consisting of a permanent commission, an archbishop-secretary, and a number of episcopal commissions presided over by an archbishop. Finally, in 1951 an assembly of all the bishops of the country was constituted. It met triennially and worked through permanent commissions.¹⁷ The conference established in Spain in 1947 remained exclusively for the archbishops although it was customary for each archbishop to meet beforehand with his suffragans to determine matters that should be discussed by the conference.¹⁸

A unique innovation in the development of episcopal conferences occurred in 1955 with the formation of the Consejo Episcopal Latino-Americano (CELAM). For the first time an international association for episcopal consultation came into being. Its membership consisted of a representative from each episcopal conference in Latin America. CELAM was to meet once a year, usually at the site of the general secretariat, Bogota, Colombia. Later ten specialized departments were set up to coordinate activities: Vocations, Liturgy, Education, Seminaries, General Pastorate, Lay Apostolate, Public Opinion, Social Action, and the Latin American Committee for the Faith.¹⁹ CELAM's most noteworthy meeting took place in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968. There the bishops affirmed that economic dependency was responsible for the underdevelopment of the continent, denounced institutionalized violence, and committed the church to participation in the liberation of the poor.

In addition to the international CELAM there were forty-three national conferences functioning at the start of Vatican II.²⁰ For much of

the Catholic world, conferences had become the normal means of coordinating church activity at a level beyond the local diocese. The conciliar model which had worked so well from the earliest years of Christianity did not seem suited for modern times. For over a millennium and a half councils had met sporadically to determine questions of faith and to enact norms for ecclesiastical structure and discipline. Then the Council of Trent (1545-1563) faced the challenge of the Protestant Reformation by proclaiming authentic teaching on the whole range of Catholic belief and by enacting legislation on all aspects of ecclesial life. For the next three centuries there seemed little left for councils to settle. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, political revolution and the spread of industrialism began to threaten the survival of the Church. The instability of the times allowed little latitude for the formalism and legislative fixity of councils. Far more desirable was it for the bishops to consult more frequently on an informal basis to deal with the ever-changing scene. Under such circumstances the episcopal conference emerged and flourished. The Church can supply from its treasure new things as well as old (Mt. 13:52)

Notes

1. Francis Dvornik, "Origins of Episcopal Synods," The Once and Future Church: A Communion of Freedom, ed. James A. Coriden (New York: Alba House, 1971), p. 40. Also see Hermann J. Sieben, "Episcopal Conferences in Light of Particular Councils during the First Millennium" and Antonio Garcia y Garcia, "Episcopal Conferences in Light of Particular Councils during the Second Millennium," The Jurist 48 (1988): 30-56, 57-67.

2. For a listing of the first episcopal conferences in chronological origin see D.G. Oesterle, "Adnotationes," Monitor Ecclesiasticus 78 (1953): 196-204.

3. Collectio Lacensis: Acta et decreta sacrorum conciliorum recentiorum, ed. Jesuits of Maria Laach (Freiburg Brisgoviae: Herder, 1870-1890) V: 1215.

4. The most important documentation is listed by M. Lalmant, "Assemblées des évêques," Dictionnaire de droit canonique. I (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1935) I:1175-1176.

5. Peter Huizing, "The Structure of Episcopal Conferences," The Jurist 18 (1968): 164. A lengthy bibliography is appended.

6. Pius X to the bishops of Bavaria April 30, 1911, Acta Apostolicae Sedis 3 (1911): 264-65.

7. Ronan Hoffman, "International Episcopal Co-operation," The Jurist 23 (1963): 9. For the Latin text of the encyclical letter Evangelii praecones see Acta Apostolicae Sedis 43 (1951): 501.

8. For the statements issued at the conclusion of these assemblies see Peter Guilday, The National Pastorals of the American Hierarchy 1792-1919, (Washington: National Catholic Welfare Council, 1923). Also see Hugh J. Nolan, ed., Pastoral Letters of the United States Catholic Bishop: Vol. I, 1792-1940 (Washington: National Conference of Catholic Bishops and United States Catholic Conference, 1983).

9. Elizabeth K. McKeown, "The 'National Idea' in the History of the American Episcopal Conference," Episcopal Conferences: Historical, Canonical, and Theological Studies, ed. Thomas J. Reese (Washington; Georgetown University Press, 1989), pp. 63-66. Also see Elizabeth McKeown, War and Welfare: American Catholics and World War I (New York: Garland Press, 1988).

10. John B. Sheerin, Never Look Back: The Career and Concerns of John J. Burke (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), pp. 57-62.

11. Guilday, The National Pastorals, p. 296.

12. McKeown, "The National Idea," p.67.

13. On April 10, 1919, however, Pope Benedict XV did give his approval: "We learn that you have unanimously resolved that a yearly meeting of all the bishops shall be held....This is truly a worthy resolve, and with the utmost satisfaction we bestow our approval." (United States Catholic Conference, National Catholic War Council file, Benedict XV to Cardinal James Gibbons, April 10, 1919). This text is cited by Elizabeth McKeown, "Apologia for an American Catholicism: The Petition and Report of the National Catholic Welfare Council to Pius XI" April 25, 1922, Church History 43 (1974): 518, n. 6. Also see John Tracy Ellis Life of James Cardinal Gibbons: Archbishop of Baltimore, 1834-1921 vol. 2 (Milwaukee; Bruce Publishing Co., 1952), pp. 293-97.

14. Gerald Fogarty, "The Authority of the National Catholic Welfare Conference," Episcopal Conference: Historical, Canonical, and Theological Studies, pp. 90-93.

15. *ibid.* p. 74.

16. Sheerin, Never Look Back, pp. 172-90, esp. 177.

17. Bilan du Monde, 2nd ed. (Paris and Tournai: Casterman, 1964), II: 339-40. For this and the next two references I am indebted to Raymond W. Kutner, "The Development, Structure, and Competence of the Episcopal Conference," Canon Law Studies 480 (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1972), pp. 56 -60.

18. Marcellino De Anta, Arturo Lobo, Sabino Moran, Comentarios al Codigo de Derecho Canonico (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1963-1964), I: 603. Also see Bilan du Monde, II: 327.

19. Conferencia general del episcopado Latino-Americano, Conclusiones (Roma: Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1956).

20. Anuario Pontificio 1962 (Città del Vaticano: Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1962), pp. 773-77.