

CORPUS Ambassador

Hearing Oneself in a Bishop's Voice

In the long history of Christianity, we have struggled to find a permanent, unchangeable structure in which to contain the essence and nobility of the Gospel it proclaims. The misstep we take often is mistaking the nobility of the doctrine or the message for the form which contains it. The best we have been able to do is the structure of the New Testament. That has withstood the centuries and remained unchanged.

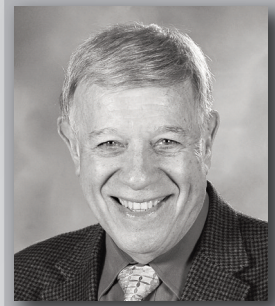
As the effort is made to find a structure for the Church, the most enduring form it has taken is the division of the Church into bishops (including the Bishop of Rome), clergy and laity. The New Testament gives us Peter, the other apostles, and the people at large. The difficulty in arranging this is not the need for other categories but working out the relationships between and among the different players so that all have their part, their boundaries and their limits.

The Church functions best when all have a role the other players respect. The laity at large speak by virtue of their baptism and from the radical concreteness of their daily life. The clergy are those most often who administer the sacraments of the Church and preach the Gospel. The bishops are those who organize the structure of the Church and see to it that all voices are heard and brought as much as possible into harmony with one another.

The laity are the most widespread and diffuse of this tripartite division. The more their voices are heard the healthier the Church is. In the nineteenth century, Cardinal Newman spoke of how awkward and truncated the Church would be if the laity did not speak and if the very concept of conscience, which they use as their guide, were seen as little more than obedience or responsiveness. The clergy are most active in seeing to it that sacraments are regularly celebrated, that people understand their significance and participate in them.

The Church is most essentially a sacramental institution. Its sacraments are not primarily the actions of a group expressing its faith but the charter a group is given to evangelize the world. Jesus did not limit himself to showing how God was in him, but extended this to making the world a different place because of it.

The bishops are those who hear the range of voices in the Church and bring them as effectively as possible into harmony with one another. One does not hear clergy and laity as a bishop speaks, nor certainly the voice of the bishop alone. When bishops speak from the fullness of their mandate, one hears the bishops certainly but one also hears the echo of the laity and the clergy. The bishop is charged with seeing to it that the echo of these voices is heard but, most especially, the sound of the harmony between and among them.



Anthony T. Padovano

is a

Priest,

Husband,

Father,

Grandfather,

Theologian,

Author,

Playwright,

Professor Emeritus

He currently serves as

CORPUS Ambassador

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The Church is not harmonized by a mandate from a bishop but by showing how what is said by the bishop is an echo of what the laity were saying and what the clergy sought to say loudly and clearly. The task of a bishop would be made very simple if all the bishop did was to offer instructions. The bishop's task is very demanding. It requires not only that one hears the bishops insight into a problem but also the way the laity and clergy were seeking to say more clearly what the bishop has put into words more effectively. A bishop harmonizes the essence and brings all together in a synthesis of liberating one-ness. The bishop then is truly the shepherd who leads the sheep to where they were going or, even more effectively, leads them to where they wish to be.

The parables of Jesus are those which have others say what was in the hearts of the hearer.

The task we have sketched for the bishop is one that cannot be realized except in profound harmony. A bishop is meant to speak after the bishop has experienced dialogue with the flock. The apostles followed Jesus readily because they had been to his home, so to speak, before they met him.

The parables of Jesus are clear in a sense, to those who hear them, because they hear the echo of what is in their hearts.

Jesus could not have spoken the parables if he had not followed the human heart and understood what it was seeking in the steps it took.

