

Not Politics as Usual: Why The Church Is Not A Democracy

"The church is not a democracy," people say; and everyone nods. Sometimes the statement is nothing more than a verbal gesture of futility and despair: *they are not listening to us*. Sometimes it's an assertion of clerical authority: *laypeople simply don't have a say in these matters*. Either way, to my ears it is the sound of a door slamming.

I understand the urge to slam doors and storm off. But if, in the wake of the clergy sex-abuse crisis, we are to restore responsible governance to the church and moral credibility to church leadership, then the whole people of God must work together diligently, priests and people alike. I want to suggest some ways we can do that. First, however, we need to understand that "the church is not a democracy" neither explains nor excuses our failures and our frustrations to this point. Perhaps the church is not a democracy, but neither is it dictatorship, nor the last absolute monarchy in Europe. We need--and we have--our own model of organization. The problem isn't that we are refusing to be a democracy. It is that we are failing to be the Mystical Body of the risen Christ.

As the Mystical Body, the church is called to a far higher standard of inclusivity, equality, and generosity of spirit than democracy alone can guarantee. In a two-party democracy, after all, the minority party is legally excluded from many important decisions--the legislative agenda and so forth. In the Mystical Body, every member matters. No one is to be silenced or marginalized. As the Mystical Body, the church by faith possesses a truth that observation alone could never establish: We are all made in the image of God, and thereby are we called to love one another.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident," says the American Declaration of Independence, "that all men are created equal, [and] that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights . . ." That's fine at first glance, but only at first glance. People are certainly not created equal. Some people are Nobel Laureate astrophysicists and others can barely read. Some people struggle to walk but others can ski downhill backwards. Some people are autistic, some are athletic, some are witty, some are wasted by disease. Equal? By what measure?

By God's measure, which is the only measure that counts. We are all made in God's image, and that image burns continually within us no matter how obscured by sin, by suffering, or by circumstance. Nothing can separate us from God's love because God sees through all that bends and breaks and buries us alive amidst all that can go wrong with life. God is incarnate in each and every one of us. That belief is the cultural and historical origin of the great American claim that all of us are equal and thus we all have equal standing in the eyes of the law.

As a practical matter, of course, equality is difficult to come by. America's history can be described as the search, in ever widening circles, to understand what we mean by "created equal" and to live up to the ideals proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence and in the Constitution. Poor people, African people, female people, people whose voting districts fail to maintain election machinery--we have incessantly disenfranchised one another, because this Biblical and American ideal is a lofty one. Children are made to memorize the opening paragraphs of Declaration of Independence not because America always measures up to that

standard, but because we know we should. The American vision originates in a deeply Judeo-Christian vision of what it means to be human.

One can read Biblical history with the same eyes, as an endlessly enlarging story of God's redemptive insistence that we are all made in the image of God and called to live up that *imago dei* within each of us. For instance, God repeatedly calls marginal characters to prophetic roles. God chronically prefers misfits, second sons, unknown characters from off in the hills--people who look for all the world like nothing more than nobodies that nobody sent. God works not through their talents, not through their credentials and their official positions but through their courage and their openness to the Spirit.

Jesus himself preached first and foremost to the outcast, the marginalized, the dubious characters of his own times, and they were the ones who followed him. It was the women in this group--the least of the least--who stayed with him through the long agony of crucifixion; it was a woman who was first witness to the Resurrection and first preacher of that Good News. God is always unexpected, always disruptive and demanding, in part because God so often speaks to us through people whom we think we can afford to ignore.

But we can afford to ignore no one. No one. Grace is the most elusive substance on earth, and at least in my life grace has regularly appeared through very iffy characters. For bishops and cardinals, that means listening to lay people, no matter who they are. For lay people, that means listening to ordained leadership at every level. From Opus Dei to Call to Action, all of us must listen to all of us, because God speaks God's truth through people we don't expect.

The "angel of the Lord" never arrives with gilded wings, a gauzy outfit, a beatific smile, and a certificate of authenticity. Prophets are a notoriously edgy group. They make everyone else uneasy. The Mystical Body is full of folks you would rather avoid. And if some of them try to avoid you as well, that doesn't mean the effort to converse is pointless. God is not a linear thinker, and God's ways are fairly strange. "Losers" win, as long as they don't lose faith.

What would it mean for the whole church to accept the challenge to be something much more richly inclusive than mere democracy? Let me make four suggestions.

1. We need to honor our own traditions of discernment. Discernment is a more subtle form of decision-making than majority vote. Without discernment, the majority are apt to be swayed more by self-interest and the status quo than by justice and moral obligation. Discernment listens prayerfully to everyone, alert to God's habitual preference for unexpected characters.

Acting alone, the bishops cannot restore the trust and credibility they have lost. They need the active and authoritative participation of lay people if they are to demonstrate that integrity has been restored to the office of bishop. They need the active and authoritative participation of parish clergy. But sharing power and practical authority will not be enough on its own. Democratic procedures won't help if we are not prayerfully listening for the elusive, unpredictable voice of the Spirit.

2. We need to remember that the difference between right and wrong is not in human hands. What is legal is a much lower standard than what is moral. Politicians and business executives accused of malfeasance always insist, "I did nothing wrong." What they mean is simply that their lawyers found a loophole. That's not good enough for the church, or at least it shouldn't be.

As the Mystical Body, we are called to do what is morally right, not merely what is legally permissible or legally required. Secret tribunals may satisfy canon law, but they will not restore the moral credibility of church authority. Secrecy and dereliction of office generated this crisis in the first place; more secrecy and more assertion of legal prerogatives will not resolve it. Lay people must have an equal role in these tribunals, which cannot be held in secret. Only the whole community of the faithful, acting openly, together, and in accord with the highest moral norms, can begin to restore what has been defaced. Bishops have failed to respond in morally appropriate ways to the presence of grievous sin among both parish priests and fellow bishops; bishops cannot repair that damage by themselves and in secret. Nor can diocesan records be shipped out of the country, safe from the legal discovery proceedings that have so mortified all of us.

Diocesan administration must become both transparent and participatory, or else responsible parents will simply keep their children away from priests altogether. Bishops fail to understand that the threat of priestly predators is unspeakable: given the authority traditionally vested in the clergy, sexual predation carries the same psychic taboo and moral horror as incest. Parental response will be absolute--and rightly so. Bishops who have failed to respond with equal clarity are twice guilty: failing to respond with moral horror and failing to protect the faithful. In this situation, legal stratagems are no substitute for courageous moral clarity. Legalism perpetuates and extends the scandal that these bishops have brought upon the whole church, both in America and elsewhere.

3. As we struggle through this crisis, we need to remember the difference between the expedient and the true. [Ethicist Stanley Hauerwas--dubbed "America's Best" theologian by Time Magazine \(September 17, 2001\)](#)--once wrote an hilarious argument that Bill Clinton could not tell a lie. And why is that? Because, Hauerwas argued, Clinton says what it is expedient to say. One cannot tell a lie if one cannot speak the truth. If one's speech is governed not by the true but by the expedient, then one cannot tell a lie.

As we listen to one another, as we search for the courage to say and to do what must be said and done, we must tell the truth. We must not fall to the standard of mere expedience, disguised perhaps as false courtesy, as hollow deference, or as advice from lawyers. It was of course expedient to transfer known pedophiles from parish to parish. It was expedient to foist off deeply troubled priests onto another diocese. And now of course would be expedient to deny and to hide all evidence of such grievous sin. Much of this was and is legally permissible.

But all this happened in the first place because it was not expedient to face the spiritual and psychological carnage of a priest sexually assaulting a child. It is never expedient to rock the boat, to admit our sins, to face our failures and our unspeakable shame. Liability lawyers would dissolve in hysterics if, in giving a deposition, a bishop lifted up his hands and said, "I have

sinned exceedingly in thought, word and deed, through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault. Therefore I beseech Blessed Mary ever Virgin, all the angels and saints, and you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God." That's not how the law works. I know that. I also know that it *is* supposed to be how the church works. Until the church starts acting like the church, we will remain mired in this mess. Those guilty of notorious sin and massive scandal cannot continue to exercise moral authority and public leadership without compromising the integrity of the church itself. The faithful are not merely "confused" by the fact that most of them have continued to do so. We are outraged and grief-stricken.

We cannot escape this crisis by doing what is merely expedient. Prophetic action is never quiet, safe, conventional, or in accord with the prudent advice of liability lawyers and canon lawyers. The Spirit of God is always disruptive, and especially so when ostensible religious leaders have been guilty of aiding and abetting grievous sin. There have always been prophetic voices speaking the truth to such leaders. And the church has always had people open to the grace to listen to the voice of that Truth--not the voice of fearful expedience

4. What is popular--what gets the most votes--is not always what is wise. In his famous treatise [*Democracy in America*](#), Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) worried about what he called "the tyranny of the majority." Prophetic voices are solitary ones. They can be silenced or outvoted. That's true whether the voting happens in the US Congress, or at a meeting of the American bishops, or at a meeting of any of the democratically organized mainline Protestant denominations. A lay board reviewing and approving appointments of priests to parishes, were such boards to be established, would be equally liable to the tyranny of the majority. Votes do not establish truth just as expedience or the law do not establish truth. Truth and wisdom are not established by human hands. They are the work and the gift of God.

Then why vote at all? Why argue that lay people must have a serious role to play in the governance of the church? Because the Spirit of God is elusive. Because the *imago dei* burns in each of us. None of us see as God sees, and God can speak through anyone. Having the power to vote, as de Tocqueville realized, does not guarantee anything. Life does not come with guarantees. But democratic procedures are far better than the alternative, which is the sad fact that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Ordination rescues no one from original sin, and here we have widespread evidence that the ordained have failed to restrain one another's perversions and to call one another's leadership into moral account. Lay people have to step in if we are to restore the proper authority of the church.

Our very best efforts, as necessary as they are, can never do the work of grace. We are all in need of grace, and we are all in need of forgiveness. When so many bishops have repeatedly placed sexually dysfunctional priests into occasions of sin, something is wrong. Something additional is seriously wrong when the church has repeatedly turned cowardly, sometimes cruel priests into bishops, thereby placing *them* into occasions of sin. Lay people cannot plead innocence by saying we had no formal role or legal responsibility in the appointing of bishops or in the survey of their performance in office. These men are the products of Catholic congregations, Catholic families, Catholic schools and seminaries, Catholic culture, and Catholic

traditions. They have lived and worked and prayed among us. They are ours, whether or not we want to claim them. In their failure, we have failed. Their shame is our shame.

As we continue our efforts to face that shame and to resolve this crisis, let us remember that the church is not a democracy. It is the Mystical Body of the Risen Christ. We are loved, and the love of God burns unceasingly within us. If we work and pray unceasingly to love one another as we should, we will find the courage and the wisdom to acknowledge our sins, to amend our lives, and to begin again to live together prayerfully as the Body of Christ.

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