

## **Accountability, Credibility and Authority**

### **Paul Lakeland**

My brief remarks today will focus on the place of accountability in the church, especially on the role that lay people must play in a more accountable church. I will divide them into three brief sections. First I want to look at the importance of the laity in teaching the church to be more accountable. Second, I will point to the rich traditions of the early church, where lay people and their ordained leaders exercised a joint accountability for the church's life. And I will conclude by suggesting that such an accountable church should make us more like God and less like the Ford Motor Company.

#### **One**

Let me begin by declaring that in today's Catholic Church, the laity are the true leaders in accountability. That is not to say that no clergy are accountable, or that all laypeople are shining examples of accountability, but rather that there is something in the structure of lay life, as opposed to the clerical lifestyle, that brings us face to face much more concretely with the shape of our accountability. In everything we do, we lay people are accountable. In our work lives we are accountable to employers, clients, students, patients, whatever. But more importantly, in our personal lives most of us are accountable to partners, spouses, children, extended family. If we do not balance our checkbooks, terrible things can happen. If we do not pay our mortgage, it can get even worse. If we are irresponsible in our use of alcohol, or take to drugs, or seek sexual intimacy outside our domestic frameworks, we put our very lives in jeopardy, offer bad example to our children, cause pain to those we love. In the end, except perhaps for the truly wealthy among us, laypeople live less secure lives than the clergy. Short of actual criminal activity, clerical futures are assured in ways that ours are not. As things stand in the church at the present time, this level of security is a reasonable gift to give a celibate clergy. But it carries with it the burden of lack of accountability to others. Being responsible to your self alone is so much more difficult.

Lives built around professional and domestic obligations, whether those of partnered or single people, with or without children, say something essential about human life. The human person is from the first moment of life intended by God to be embraced by a loving community within which she or he will come to be the person they are. No community, no truly formed individual. Spirituality is nothing more or less than life lived intentionally, and for Christians that means life lived in the light of God's creative will. We are born to be together, not to be alone. And accountability is what keeps us together, just as much and sometimes more than the purely romantic dimensions of love. Love is a blend of eros and agape. Too often the church talks as if eros is blind sexual desire and agape is laudable self-sacrifice. Some truth here, but lay life "marries" the two (no pun intended). Laypeople know that the two are closely intertwined, and that the fullest meaning of agape is not self-sacrifice but accountability.

In these final few words I have talked a little as if lay life is married life. I know that there are many lay people who choose the single life or find it to be their lot. While much of what I have said about domesticity may not apply directly to some of them, they may show even more clearly than partnered people the need for accountability even within a celibate lifestyle. In the end, because I believe that optional celibacy for the diocesan clergy is an idea whose time has come around again, I do not think that laity and clergy are in principle divided on lines of accountability. Even now there are a few married Catholic priests who know first hand the immediate accountability that goes with spousal and familial obligations. But here and now in the church, before these changes come, as come they will, laypeople as a matter of fact are distinguished from clergy by the more direct accountability that goes with lack of ultimate security and the presence of domestic responsibilities. This is a good thing for the church, for now. Its presence in lay life is one of the reasons why lay people have been shocked by the crisis of leadership revealed in the scandal of sexual abuse. The abusers are sick and psychologically immature people who have preyed upon the innocent. But the enablers are supposedly our leaders in the faith, who have far too often given evidence of irresponsible inattention to accountability, both for their own actions and those of the perpetrators. It is because we lay people know the discipline of accountability and are aware, perhaps in our own lives, of the price that we can pay for lapses in that accountability, that we have to insist on it in our church. We are the experts in accountability. We are the teachers. We need to teach.

Let's end this little section with a question. If it is true that lay life is a better teacher of a truly mutual accountability than clerical life, which it is, what are we going to do with the clerical lifestyle and training to ensure that our ordained ministers have been schooled in genuinely reciprocal accountability?

## Two

It seems that we may have some important lessons to learn from the church's distant past about the proper role of the laity. Over sixteen hundred years ago the church was in the grip of the Arian heresy, and its future was by no means secure. Bishops were as likely as anyone else to espouse the views of Arius, and if the church had been forced to follow their lead, today's orthodoxy might look very different from the one we possess. As Cardinal Newman so famously noted, the faith of the church was maintained for the best part of a century by the laity, not by the bishops and presbyters. Of course, I am not suggesting that our bishops have fallen away from the faith of the church, but I think that the example set by the fourth century laity is one that could benefit us, namely, that it is the right and responsibility of lay people to speak out, when necessary for the good of the church. And in this last phrase I am not quoting the distant past, but rather the words of the bishops of Vatican II a mere forty years ago.

The laity of the early church probably had a less difficult time mobilizing themselves in defense of the faith because they were used to having a significant voice in church governance. Many early church texts provide clear evidence that lay people were consulted as a matter of course about the work of the church, and especially about the

selection of their leaders. Where they did not directly elect them, they were closely involved in the process, perhaps choosing by acclamation from a short list brought before them by the bishops of the province. So, for example, the third century bishop Cyprian of Carthage was quite clear in his letter to the church that “it is our custom when we make appointments to clerical office to consult you beforehand, and in council with you to weight the character and qualities of each candidate.” Indeed, he is adamant that he has always been committed “right from the beginning of my episcopate, to do nothing on my own private judgment without your counsel and the consent of the people.” In *The Apostolic Tradition* the third century Roman writer Hippolytus was quite clear that the bishop should be chosen first by all the people (*pantos tou laou*) and subsequently approved by the bishops and presbyters. Origen wrote that “the presence of the laity was essential in Episcopal elections.” Pope Leo the Great in the fifth century famously enunciated the principle, “Let the one who is going to rule over all be elected by all,” only confirming the words of his predecessor of the previous century, Celestine I, who declared that “a bishop should not be given to those who are unwilling to receive him. The consent and the wishes of the clergy, the people and the nobility are required.”

Any serious examination of the role of laypeople in the church of the first five centuries will uncover a surprising level of active lay accountability for the life of the church, and in particular for the selection of bishops and clergy. It will also see the beginnings of the end of this role in the close association of the church with the state that came about in the fourth century reign of the Emperor Constantine. Let’s end this section with a question to chew on: if it is true, as it is, that the church has always to a degree reflected the secular political models with which it is surrounded, why is it that the church is so unyielding today in its utter unwillingness to allow a measure of popular participation (i.e., democracy in the true sense) in the life of the church?

### Three

One of the great ironies of the Catholic Church is that while it is devoted to a Trinitarian God it has resolutely adopted a hierarchical structure. One would think, on the face of it, that the ecclesial structure that God would want from the church would be one that took the hint from God’s nature about the superiority of trinitarianism over hierarchical stratification. Just as the call to Christian discipleship should suggest to us a life lived according to the patterns and lived choices of Jesus of Nazareth, so you would think that the church of God would try to reflect what seems to be the divine preference for relationship. What would happen if we modeled the church on the life of God instead of on the structures of the Roman Empire or the Ford Motor Company? One would think that it would be a good thing. It would certainly seem that the efforts at Vatican II and beyond to build a communion ecclesiology represented steps in this direction, yet so much in Catholicism remains undeniably hierarchical.

So let’s get practical. If the Church is truly to practice accountability in the fullest sense of the word, then both its polity and its culture must manifest total mutuality. There can be no hierarchy in the Church, in the sense of strata of power, still less of levels of holiness attached to strata of power, if the Church is truly to be the Church of God. Of

course, there are differences in the mission of people in the church as they place their particular charisms at the service of the church. Some people will take up leadership positions, and leadership sometimes involves the exercise of authority, even if that is often a confession of failure. But the model for leaders in the Church cannot be the stern Victorian parental image of a God who lovingly corrects and sometimes chastises God's people. That is the wrong image of God, and therefore of God's church. We are invited into the divine life. We are called to the same loving interrelatedness that the Trinity is, and our leaders—while their mission is to lead—should be held to the same standards of fundamental equality as the divine life itself exemplifies. Thus St. Augustine's famous remark: "For you I am a bishop, with you I am a Christian."

While the Church today is not openly dealing with a threat of heresy, it is in crisis. This crisis is occasioned by a fundamental misconception of what is central to the Church. Despite the rhetoric of communion ecclesiology that the teachings of Vatican II more or less mandated, the Roman restorationism of the past quarter of a century has returned us institutionally to where we were before Vatican II. That is a place in which the responsibility of the community to mirror the relationality of the divine life has been overwhelmed by the *wholly* human predilection for rules, regulations, buildings, status, power over others, secrecy, silence, ambition and expediency. None of this is from God. The German Lutheran theologian Dorothee Soelle did not mince her words when she described this kind of phenomenon as "necrophilia." She had a point. The Church thrives by sharing in the life of God through the body and blood of Christ, not through the dead stuff of institutional bureaucracy.

It is important for liberal and conservative Catholics alike to understand that the debate over authority and democratization is not in the end about political structures in the institution, but about whether the Church is a divine or a human reality. Of course, it is both, but the insistence on unthinking obeisance to a hierarchically-structured polity is the reduction of the Church to a purely human reality. Curiously enough, it is the liberal call for more voice for all that is seeking to bring the Church closer to the divine life, and therefore working for its holiness. Liberals who stop at a simple critique of the dysfunctional elements of our present polity are playing into the hands of the institution by accepting the rules of the game as the institution understands it. "The hierarchy" is God-given, conservative voices will say. "The hierarchy" is a human element in the Church and hence changeable, liberals might counter. The truth is that good order in the Church *is* God-given, but it is a structure of openness, accountability and holiness patterned on the divine life, not the pyramid of power that has bedeviled the Church since at least the Middle Ages. The good order of the church is not necessarily tied to any particular polity, not to that of imperialism or autocratic monarchy or benevolent despotism. The Trinitarian model we have explored does not necessarily mandate democracy either, but it certainly suggests a strong preference for collaborative engagement with the common tasks of Christian mission.

The fundamental problem of authority in the Church at the present day is not that this or that pope is perceived by some to exceed his authority, or that liberal laity are dissenters, or that episcopal collegiality is underexercised. The deepest problem is that

the Church has lost authority in a world which needs its leadership so much, because it has lost credibility. And loss of credibility, in its turn, must be put down to a public failure to be a fully open, accountable community. What the world sees is inevitably the failures in lower accountability, with poor episcopal leadership in the sex abuse scandal as the primary example in North America in recent times. But we in the community of faith can come to understand that such failures in accountability are attributable to our failures in that higher accountability. If we were ready to recognize that the life of the Church must seek to mirror the divine life, the lower accountability would mostly take care of itself. Until we take this step we will continue to embroiled in sterile debates about who is dissenting from what.

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