

Church Governance

Overview

In the earliest centuries of the Church, before there was a distinction between clergy and laity, all the baptized played more significant roles than they have during the last 1500 years—including significant roles in the governance of the Church. For example, the People of God were often consulted by the bishops and even played a role in the election of or the approval of elected bishops.

However, once the clergy became fully established, all important decisions were soon exercised by the Pope, bishops and lower clergy.

During the Dark Ages and Middle Ages, this clerical bias perhaps made some sense: Clergy were among the most highly educated people while the majority of the laity had little or no education. Few objected when decisions in the Church were left in the hands of the clergy.

But in the 20th and 21st centuries, many of the laity are now more highly educated than the clergy. Countless lay people, especially in the West, have advanced degrees in sacred scripture, theology, pastoral ministry, and religious education, to say nothing of their expertise in other fields. Despite such qualifications, lay people today are mostly marginalized, with only limited access to meaningful decision-making roles within the Church.

This bias against lay involvement inherited from the Middle Ages makes little sense in a modern world, and Pope Francis seems most interested in making inroads on involving the laity in decision making.

Equally important are the changes Pope Francis has initiated in centralized Roman structures, which in the past decades have eroded consistently the concept of collegiality established at the Second Vatican Council.

The First Year in Review

The quotations from Pope Francis at the right indicate his desire to initiate significant changes in Church structures and governance, both for the laity and for the hierarchy. His numerous comments about **the role of the laity**, for example, coupled with his frequent comments disparaging clericalism, refocus Church attention on restoring power and responsibility to the laity.

Pope Francis: The First Year

Notable Quotes

“All the faithful, considered as a whole, are infallible in matters of belief ... When the dialogue among the people and the bishops and the pope goes down this road and is genuine, then it is assisted by the Holy Spirit. ... We should not even think, therefore, that ‘thinking with the church’ means only thinking with the hierarchy of the church.” (Pope Francis, interview in America Magazine, October 2013)

“The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples’ supernatural discernment in matters of faith when ‘from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful’ they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals.” (Lumen Gentium, 12)

“Lay people are, put simply, the vast majority of the People of God. The minority—ordained ministers—are at their service. ...

Reflecting the teachings from the Second Vatican Council (*Lumen gentium* #12), Francis has reminded us that infallibility, as defined during the First Vatican Council, belongs primarily to all the faithful. Because that is true, certainly there must be a greater place in the Church for decision-making by the laity.

One of the first places where greater emphasis should emerge, Pope Francis says, is a more significant role for the laity in Parish and Diocesan Pastoral and Financial Councils.

Francis also addressed the proper role for the laity in his first major writing, the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. There he outlined a much more significant role for the faithful in the evangelization of the world and encouraged the clergy to liberate the laity from their “infantilization” so that they may take their rightful role in the Church.

Changes within the hierarchy have been another important focus. When the Cardinals met in the Conclave before the papal election, they made it clear that they wanted a reform of the Vatican Curia. But some 50 years earlier, participants in Vatican Council II had called for greater collegiality among the bishops and bishops’ conferences, and that call had not been heeded. Instead, in the years since the Council, the popes and the Vatican Curia successfully re-centralized authority in the Vatican.

Pope Francis has taken steps to change this Rome-centric governance. During the first month of his papacy, he created an advisory council of eight Cardinals from around the world to advise him on restructuring the Vatican Curia. The Curia, he said, must be of service to bishops rather than operating as a centralized decision-making body. So one major task the new council faces is a revision of the Apostolic Constitution on the Roman Curia (*Pastor Bonus*).

Observers say this new council of Cardinals may become a permanent body expected to make recommendations to the Pope on other issues as well. In addition, other persons may be appointed to the group either permanently or for short-term assignments. If so, the new council should significantly enhance the diversity of decision-making power among the world’s bishops.

Greater collegiality also would return to the bishops the authority to evangelize their people in ways that adapt the Gospel to their cultures. The bishops in Asia and Africa have long sought greater freedom in adapting Catholic Christianity to their local cultures. In the English-speaking world, the most recent example of Curial interference is the new translation of the liturgy, which first was taken away from the Commission that had been established for the translation and then laced with more than 10,000 changes dictated by the Vatican.

A clear awareness of this responsibility of the laity, grounded in their baptism and confirmation, does not appear in the same way in all places. In some cases, it is because lay persons have not been given the formation needed to take on important responsibilities. In others, it is because in their particular churches room has not been made for them to speak and to act, due to an excessive clericalism which keeps them away from decision-making.”
(*Evangelii Gaudium*, #102)

“As pastors, bishops and priests, are we conscious and convinced of the mission of the lay faithful and do we give them the freedom to continue discerning, in a way befitting their growth as disciples, the mission which the Lord has entrusted to them? Do we support them and accompany them, overcoming the temptation to manipulate or infantilize them? Are we constantly open to letting ourselves be challenged in our efforts to advance the good of the Church and her mission in the world?” (Pope Francis to the Episcopal leadership in Latin America, CELAM, July 2013.)

“Clericalism is also a temptation very present in Latin America. Curiously, in the majority of cases, it has to do with a sinful

What's Ahead

There is no doubt that Pope Francis sees change of some basic structures within the Church as his mandate from the Cardinals. The reform of the Curia, which was called for at the Second Vatican Council (in *Lumen Gentium*) but then was set back by the previous two Popes, has returned to center stage—as well as to “center target.” Thus, although Pope John Paul II’s Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus* reinforced the current structure of the Curia, Francis’s charge to the “Council of Eight” Cardinals is not just to revise *Pastor Bonus* but also to write a new Constitution. When this has been accomplished, significant collegial power should be returned to its rightful place with the bishops and bishops’ conferences around the world.

Francis has frequently spoken of the need for *unity within diversity* (again an echo of the Second Vatican Council) rather than the uniformity that had been demanded by the Vatican and previous Popes. His approach and the restoration of collegiality will support the work of evangelization and allow Catholics to preach the Gospel in a language and cultural forms that are meaningful on the local level.

For the laity, Pope Francis’s frequent comments about lay responsibilities and his reiteration that baptism confers on all the right to full participation in the Church bodes well. But additional work will be needed to open up roles for the laity in Church decision-making.

The Second Vatican Council had, for the first time, affirmed certain rights and responsibilities of the laity. Among these is the right and duty to make known their concerns to the pastors and bishops. This right then was added to Canon Law:

According to the knowledge, competence, and prestige which [the laity] possess, they have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church and to make their opinion known to the rest of the Christian faithful, without prejudice to the integrity of faith and morals, with reverence toward their pastors, and attentive to common advantage and the dignity of persons. (Canon 212 §3)

Unfortunately, although these rights of the laity were affirmed, there are no structures in canon law to support those rights or to guarantee that the rights will be accepted or respected.

The path to full participation in the governance of the Church remains one with many steps.

complicity: The priest clericalizes the layperson and the layperson kindly asks to be clericalized because deep down it is easier ... The phenomenon of clericalism explains, in great part, the lack of maturity and Christian freedom in a good part of the Latin American laity. [Freedom of the laity] finds expression in communal experiences: Catholic as community is expressed through popular piety. The spread of bible study groups, of ecclesial basic communities and of pastoral councils is helping to overcome clericalism and to increase lay responsibility.” (Pope Francis to the Episcopal council of CELAM in South America, July 28, 2013.)

*“Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church and the world. It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound ‘decentralization.’”
(*Evangelii Gaudium*, #16)*

*“Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church’s life and her missionary outreach.”
(*Evangelii Gaudium*, #32)*

Conclusions

Although Pope Francis says a change in attitude is more important than a change in structures, it is also quite clear from his many comments that serious structural changes are expected. We can hope that a restoration of the collegiality envisioned by the Second Vatican Council will change the emphasis on uniformity in the Church to an emphasis on unity within diversity. If so, we will experience a richer Church, one that can preach the gospel in many tongues—just as the Apostles did at that first Pentecost—without adulterating the message of salvation in Christ Jesus.

We also can hope for a more significant role for all the baptized in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church. In *Evangelii Gaudium* and in his other works, Francis has instructed bishops and priests to step away from their historical clericalism and to empower the People of God so that we all may fulfill our Gospel call to full membership in the Church.

In the meantime, we need not wait for the clergy to empower us. We must take every opportunity to speak out on the issues and concerns that affect the daily spiritual lives of all the faithful, and to demand that the bishops and pastors listen to us rather than just to one another.

What You Can Do: Start a Discussion

1. Pope Francis has made it clear that he expects bishops to be more concerned about pastoral matters than administrative matters. But many contemporary bishops have large dioceses and must handle a multitude of administrative details. What can lay people do to assist/encourage our bishops to be more attentive to the pastoral concerns of the faithful?
2. The Second Vatican Council identified the right, and the responsibility, of the laity to make their concerns known to their pastors and their bishops. How can the laity be more assertive in making their concerns/demands known to their priests and bishops?
3. Pope Francis has said that bishops must listen better to the needs of the faithful. He has called for dialogue, dialogue, dialogue rather than authoritarian announcements. What are some of the more important issues we should raise in dialogue with our bishops and in the public forum?

Resources

Articles

Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God,” An Interview with Pope Francis, (*America Magazine*, September 2013).

James Carroll, “A Radical Pope’s First Year,” (*New Yorker*, Dec. 23, 2013).

John Wijngaards, “Authority in the Catholic Church: Catholic Scholars’ Declaration on Authority in the Catholic Church,” (Catholic Research Center, November 2013).

Books

Pope Francis, “The Joy of the Gospel,” *Evangelii Gaudium*, (USCCB, 2013)

Paul Lakeland, *A Council That Will Never End: Lumen Gentium and the Church Today*, (Liturgical Press, 2013).

Michael L. Papesh, *Clerical Culture: Contradiction and Transformation*, (Liturgical Press, 2004).

Ladislav Orsy, *Receiving the Council: Theological and Canonical Insights and Debates*, (Liturgical Press, 2009).

Richard Gaillardetz, *By What Authority*, (Liturgical Press, 2003).

Take Action

[Rights of the Laity](#)

[Clericalism: Reality and Concerns](#)

[Optional Celibacy: Talking points and Action Steps](#)

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