

Quest Digest



**Collaborative Ministry,
Authority & Listening 2004**

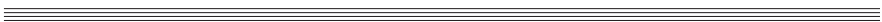
Issue 5: November 2006

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Quest Digest

Edited by
Timothy C. Potts

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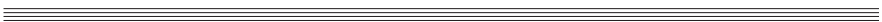
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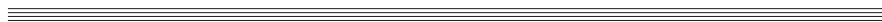


EDITORIAL

This issue of *Quest Digest* contains the papers from the 2004 conference, held in Liverpool, whose theme was 'Collaborative Ministry: Our Place as Equals' and which celebrated the 25th anniversary of the National Pastoral Congress held there in 1980. Dr Kelly of Liverpool Hope University spoke to us first, followed by Dr Tina Beattie of Roehampton University on 'Collaboration or Collusion? Working Together for a Truthful Church'.

In his address on Authority, Richard Finn invites us to make a wider application of that concept than is customary, and in so doing hopes to bridge the gap between those who lament a lack of respect for authority today and those who see a heavy-handed authority that is counter-productive. This relates to the Conference theme in that ministry and authority in the Church are intertwined. This is the first time that the substance of a talk given to a local *Quest* group has appeared in the *Digest*; it is a welcome innovation that will, I hope, set a precedent.

Two years ago the Bishops' Conference of England & Wales initiated *Listening 2004*, an exercise in which Catholics were invited to respond to a dozen questions about family life. Based on the replies, a meeting was held in each diocese attended by the local bishop and by Bishop Hine, the chairman of the CBCEW's committee for Marriage and Family Life. The results of these meetings were collated and published last year, and a three-year follow-up is planned, into 2008. It now seems opportune to review the outcome so far, and appropriate to do so in this issue, as many of the themes of the National Pastoral Congress in 1980 have re-surfaced a generation later. The bishops initiated *Listening 2004*, so they have a responsibility to respond adequately to the pastoral concerns identified during the exercise; yet it is open to question whether they are capable of doing so.



COLLABORATIVE MINISTRY

Our Place as Equals

Kevin Kelly

The Revd Dr Kelly is Parish Priest of St Basil and All Saints, Widnes, and an Emeritus Research Fellow in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Liverpool Hope University. Among his books is New Directions in Sexual Ethics.

Introduction

Thank you for your kind invitation to be one of your speakers. I feel very honoured and pleased to be here. As a Liverpoolian, may I offer you my own personal welcome to our city. You have chosen to come here this particular year in order to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the National Pastoral Congress which took place here in 1980. Your highlighting this anniversary is greatly to your credit and puts to shame the rest of the church here in England and Wales. There has been hardly a mention of this 25th anniversary in the Catholic press, even though the National Pastoral Congress was a major event in the life of the Catholic Church here in England and Wales.

Perhaps, it might be helpful to you if I began with a few words about the National Pastoral Congress – as seen by one who was there.

It took place over the long Bank Holiday weekend in May 1980. 2115 Catholics came from all over the country, including 42 bishops, 255 clergy and 150 religious. That meant, in fact, that the vast majority attending were lay men and women – 1568 in all. I have a memory of Archbishop Worlock preaching at a preparatory Mass for the Liverpool delegates a few months beforehand and stating very bluntly: “People have often said to me, ‘Aren’t you nervous at inviting so many lay people together to express their views openly and honestly?’ and I always reply: ‘Don’t you believe in the Holy Spirit in the church?’”

Enormous efforts were put into the preparation for the Congress at diocesan, deanery and parish level in all the dioceses. Delegates were not just nominal representatives of their parishes and dioceses. In each parish, meetings were held, giving people the chance to raise whatever topics they wished and express their frank and honest views on them. Over

20,000 replies were received and more than 100,000 people took part in this preparatory process. This process provided the agenda for the Congress.

A fascinating summary of the diocesan reports drawn from these parish discussions fills nearly 50 pages of the volume, *Liverpool 1980*, which gives the proceedings of the whole Congress. The full text of this summary was given to each of the 2000+ delegates before the Congress .

The Congress itself met in 7 Sectors, each devoted to one of the main themes coming from grass-roots:

1. Co-responsibility and relationships;
2. Ordained ministries;
3. Family and society;
4. Evangelisation;
5. Christian education and formation;
6. Witness; and
7. Justice.

A precious seam of gold in the *Liverpool 1980* volume is the very full report of the group discussions in each of the 7 Sectors and the final Report which was voted on and approved by everyone in each Sector.

In the course of the whole Congress only twice did the whole 2000+ meet together. The first occasion was on the opening Friday Evening for a solemn Liturgy of Renewal and Reconciliation in the Metropolitan Cathedral. The second was for the closing session which began in the Philharmonic Hall with the whole assembly listening to the 7 Sector Reports and ended with the closing Eucharist in the Metropolitan Cathedral.

A word about the documentation available on the Congress. The volume, *Liverpool 1980* is of immense value and contains most of the key preparatory and final documents. The Liverpool Archdiocesan weekly newspaper prepared a daily broadsheet for all the delegates informing them of the previous day's proceedings. A few months after the Congress there appeared a major document, *The Easter People* – prepared by Derek Worlock and team of helpers with full approval of whole Bishops' Conference and billed as their reflection "in the light of the Congress". Its text is also printed in *Liverpool 1980*. There are many good things in *The Easter People*. For instance, its very first heading is 'The Sharing Church' and it opens with a sub-heading, 'Initiative in shared responsibility' in which the opening sentence speaks of Congress as "an extraordinary

experience of what the Church is and a foretaste of what it can grow to be". (p.307)

The title, 'The Easter People', was chosen because of its obvious reference to the Resurrection. Ironically, 'The Easter People' effectively buried the Congress. This was not due to any deliberate intention on the part of those composing it. In fact, some excellent people were involved. The basic problem was that this written document took the place of any effective vehicle for keeping alive the fire which had blazed in the hearts and minds of the participants. What was needed in the wake of the Congress was some kind of collaborative group, involving lay and clergy, to keep the fire alive and help it spread throughout the whole church in England and Wales. Sadly, the only follow-up was this written text. Effectively, the initiative for any further action was left in the hands of the Bishops' Conference. It would be churlish to lay all the blame for this on the bishops. Those of us who shared in the Congress must bear our share of responsibility for not creating any effective structure to carry forward the exciting impetus given by the Congress.

I would not want to suggest that the Congress failed to achieve anything. One important impact was the fact that the views of the Congress delegates calling for a deeper listening to the experience of married couples and greater compassion for those who had suffered the tragedy of marriage breakdown could be clearly heard in the halls of the Vatican when Basil Hume & Derek Worlock both made impassioned interventions at the 1980 Synod on the Family.

In 1995, fifteen years after the Congress, a remarkable document, *The Sign We Give*, from a Working Party of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales was published by the bishops. It is a report on Collaborative Ministry and, to my mind at least, is a fruit of the kind of thinking and experience that took place at the Congress. It is almost as though the seed needed to lie in the ground for 15 years before germinating. The Chair of the Working Party was Pat Jones, who had been one of the group which produced *The Easter People*. Amazingly, the Congress is not mentioned anywhere in the text! I would recommend *The Sign We Give* very highly. It is essential and inspirational reading for your Conference topic of Collaborative Ministry.

Collaborative ministry is not the most attractive term. For the older among us it evokes memories of the war against Hitler when 'collaboration' was a bad work. It meant helping the enemy. Whereas in

the church of today – at least in theory – it touches on what we are all about as church. All the baptized share the mission given by Christ to the church. We are all co-workers (co-labourers – collaborators) under the one Lord.

I am due to retire in 3 years time when I am 75. When I celebrated my 70th birthday I told the parish that I was starting to retire on that very day. My retirement would be a long process and they were all involved in it. It was not a disaster but a God-given opportunity for them to grow still further in shared responsibility for the parish and its life and mission. I was anxious to make the point that collaborative ministry is not some kind of stop-gap, temporary measure to cope with the present shortage of priests “until normal service was resumed later”. Rather it is a key part of our self-understanding as church which the Spirit seems to bringing to the fore in our age.

There will be 3 sections to my talk:-

- I. The Theology of Collaborative Ministry
- II. Collaboration in the Church’s Teaching Ministry
- III. Quest and the Teaching Ministry in the Church

I THE THEOLOGY OF COLLABORATIVE MINISTRY

When *The Sign We Give* was published in 1995, the Editor of *The Tablet* praised it very highly and remarked that “Vatican II remains an event in the future waiting to happen rather than one which ended 30 years ago”. His point was that “the post-Vatican II understanding of the primacy of baptism has not yet worked through into ordinary Catholic life”. For that to happen there needs to be a “complete overhaul of the culture of clergy-laity relationships”. Such a relationship change needs to be worked out in terms of “partnership, equality, mutuality, cooperation and collaboration”. I would add two other relationship qualities to the Editor’s list, co-responsibility and collegiality. These are all Vatican II markers for relationships within the community of the church.

I would like to offer you some quotations from *The Sign We Give*. I will affix an underlined heading of my own to each quotation and will add a short comment in italics after each.

Life of the Trinity is the theological basis of collaborative ministry

“The central mystery of faith is the Trinity; the belief that God’s very being is relationship. God is Father, Son and Spirit, a communion of

persons. In God's own life, there is communion and relationship, distinction and diversity. Our faith in the Trinity is not just about who God is as God, but also about who God is for us. Trinitarian life is also our life, as we have been included as partners in God's own life. As human persons, we are made in the image of a God who is Trinity...

We will reflect God's life if we live in the spirit of communion and collaboration and if our relationships are characterised by equality, mutuality and reciprocity." (pp.19-20)

To understand the theology of collaborative ministry, we need to go the very heart of our Christ faith. Hence, it is not just a passing fad – and certainly not a mere temporary measure.

Priesthood of all believers

“(Vatican II) re-discovered the scriptural insight that all the baptised share in the one priesthood of Christ, that it is the whole Church that is a priesthood” (p.18).

Hence, there can be no such thing as a ‘priest-less parish’!

Theology of communion, collaborative ministry, inclusion and diversity

“The theology of communion, especially when expressed in today's cultural context, has an important message about inclusiveness. Communion means that unity can be found within diversity and that differences can be respected, and accepted as enriching and not divisive. In an important sense, to be inclusive is what it means to be catholic.... As many kinds of difference as possible should be represented in some way as a sign of the inclusiveness or catholicity of Church communion. Collaborative ministry is the most obvious and effective way of doing this.” (p.26).

This has profound and very obvious implications for Quest members – and all gay and lesbian Christians.

Equal Terms and equal valuing

“The theology of communion implies a radical and true equality among all those who share in that relationship. This equality is based on what it means to be human persons and the dignity and integrity which follow. It incorporates diversity of vocation, role and activity... In collaborative ministry there is a genuine need and desire to work together

on equal terms... The theology of communion implies equal valuing based on personhood and gift.” (pp.24-25).

This is a very relevant passage in the light of the sub-title of your Conference i.e. “Our Place as Equals”.

The role of the ordained priest in collaborative ministry

“If the priest’s primary task is to enable communion to grow, rather than to ‘run the parish’, the quality of relationships he develops will be central to his ministry. It is through the quality of relationships that he will most effectively invite people to make full use of their gifts and energy in ministries and other activities”. (p.23)

Leadership is about empowerment, serving others through enabling their gifts to be recognised and allowed to grow and flourish.

Collaborative ministry involves (p.17) :

- recognising that we all have a shared but differentiated responsibility for the life and mission of the Church;
- working together on equal terms;
- seeing our different vocations and gifts as complementary and mutually enriching – “recognition and use of people’s expertise and energies” (*Sign*, p.32);
- agreeing that we are accountable to each other for the way we fulfil our ministry;
- accountability and acknowledging the need for our on-going formation if we are to continue as competent ministers.

Collaborative ministry is essentially an attitude of mind even though it needs to be translated into practical ways of acting and appropriate structures.

The following are some other important points made in *The Sign We Give*. They do not need any further comment from me.

Implications for formation of ordained priests:

“Formation for the priestly ministry must be a preparation for the exercise of this collaborative ministry.... It should be clear before ordination that each student is capable of the relationships of mutual trust, recognition and collaboration with both men and women which will be expected of him in today’s parishes.” (p.37 & 39)

Relational skills needed for collaborative ministry:

“... evaluation, self-appraisal, listening, consulting, discerning, consensus decision-making, planning, group facilitation and handling conflict.” (p.30)

Collaborative ministry as an attitude of mind, more than cooperation or lay-involvement

“There may be parishes with strong lay involvement but little genuine collaboration... Collaborative ministry does not happen just because people work together or cooperate in some way. It is a gradual and mutual evolution of new patterns, new attitudes and new self-understanding... The decision to make a parish more collaborative needs to be made by priests and laypeople together; both have to be willing to change themselves, rather than anxious to change each other.” (p.28 & 36)

Spirituality of collaborative ministry

“Collaborative ministry draws deeply upon faith in the Trinity. It is not simply a way of re-organising work or structures. It is a way of expressing ...what God is like in the ways we live and work together.” (p.35)

Some additional comments of my own regarding what collaborative ministry should mean in practice:

The task (‘labour’) of the Church in a particular parish is the shared task (‘co-labour’) of the whole parish, not just of the clergy. All members of the parish have a shared responsibility for this task. They are all co-labourers i.e. involved in collaborative ministry. Hence, it is vital that everyone feels a shared ‘ownership’ of the parish, its life and mission

This is because we are all fully and equally members of the Church through the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and eucharist. These are the basic sacraments of membership. There cannot be a membership fuller than full membership. Even the Pope himself or our own local bishop are not fuller members of the church than we are. The sacrament of orders is secondary to baptism, confirmation and eucharist and is meant to be at their service. The ministries of lay-people are not delegated by the priest because he cannot manage to do it all himself. They flow from their full membership of the church.

When Bishop Gray came as Auxiliary to Liverpool, he remarked at the reception following his Episcopal Ordination: “When I was ordained priest, I thought it was the greatest day of my life, to share in the priesthood of Christ. Now I see that this is the greatest day of my life, when I share in the fullness of Christ’s priesthood.” A short time afterwards Archbishop Beck was introducing him to members of the Southport Deanery and mentioned this remark of Bishop Gray. The Archbishop commented: “He left out the most important day of his life – when he was baptised!” I warmed to that comment, even though a bit of me felt that the most important day of his life was when he was born, loved into existence by God.

It is not the laity who are there to help the hierarchy be the Church; it is more the other way round. The hierarchy helps the rest of the People of God exercise their ministry and mission. Priests enable parishioners to become community, to become a living and loving parish. By virtue of their baptism, lay-people are the church, the parish, the diocese. Ministry is not a privilege. It flows from our baptism. When I was Leader of the Team Ministry in Skelmersdale New Town, some of the parishioners used to say: “You priests come and go. It is we the lay-people who really are the church here in Skelmersdale. This is our life. We are not just passing through.”

There is always a danger of ‘churchifying’ collaborative ministry i.e. reducing it to liturgical ministry or church administration. The ministry of the church is to the world, out-going, sharing people’s joys and sorrows. The parish I am currently serving helps to support a HIV/AIDS Home Care project in Livingstone, Zambia. I have been out there twice – on the second occasion along with four parishioners. The project is spear-headed by a little group of nuns with much of the work being done by 106 volunteers. It seems to be completely independent of the local clergy! I have never seen any priest involved in the work. CAFOD is another example of ‘out-going’ ministry with a strong basis of lay-ownership and responsibility. This dimension is underlined in *The Sign We Give*: “Ministry overlaps with, and flows into, mission. It is the forms of life and activity through which the baptised express their discipleship in the various areas of their life; home and family; neighbourhood and wider society; parish and diocese...these activities are indeed mission” (p.18) It is also brought out forcefully and very beautifully by Denys Turner in his Summary of Sector B, Topic 4 of the

National Pastoral Congress ('The Apostolate of the Laity'). cf. *Liverpool 1980*, pp.146-150. His piece is a real gem!

An important dimension of the leadership role of the priest in the faith community consists in drawing out, drawing upon and drawing together the gifts, talents and leadership qualities in the parish. Even the specific 'leadership of the faith community' role of the priest should be exercised collaboratively. To lead is to empower, not to replace (cf. *Sign*, p.19).

In the final analysis, collaborative ministry is not a way of doing something more efficiently. It is a way of being church more authentically.

II COLLABORATION IN THE CHURCH'S TEACHING MINISTRY

The church's mission of teaching and evangelization is essentially a collaborative mission.

Often when we talk about 'teaching', we think of someone called the 'teacher' passing on knowledge, information or skills to other people called the 'pupils' or 'learners'. The word 'teaching' focuses on what the teacher is doing. It makes his/her activity the major ingredient in what is happening: if I as the teacher know my material and put it over clearly, then the responsibility rests with the pupils if they fail to learn.

For much of my time teaching moral theology in the seminary that is how I thought of teaching. I taught; my pupils were taught. However, some years ago, as a result of a course on the processes of adult learning, I underwent a kind of Copernican revolution in my understanding of my role as a teacher. I came to realize that I was working within the wrong frame of reference.

The principal frame of reference is not 'teaching', but 'learning'. Our main concentration must be on the learning process. If no learning occurs, no real teaching is taking place, however well a teacher might think he or she is teaching and however excellent their material might be objectively speaking.

As church we are not a community divided into two groups,
 the teachers (the pope and the bishops)
 those who are taught (the rest of us).

That kind of presentation was a nineteenth-century innovation and went very much against the more traditional and biblical notion which saw 'learning' and 'teaching' as two activities involving the whole church.

As Christians we are all learners and as Christians we are also all teachers.

Unpacking the two halves of that statement might help us to appreciate the collaborative nature of Christian teaching.

'As Christians we are all learners'. We remember that words of Jesus: 'You must not allow yourselves to be called teachers, for you have only one teacher, the Christ' (Mt 23,10). In fact, the word 'disciple' means 'learner'. Moreover, we are all equally dependent on the Lord for the gift of faith, be we pope or peasant. We are all believers. At this level we are all equal. At this level, strange though it might sound, we all share equally in the charism of infallibility. This is the infallibility of the church in believing (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n.12).

In any group gathered together to share a learning experience there is always a certain dynamic element at work. In the church it is the *Holy Spirit* who is the dynamic element in the learning process (cf. Karl Rahner, *The Dynamic Element in the Church*, passim). That is why the church needs to have a basic trust and confidence in its internal learning process and should allow it to take its natural course. Archbishop Worlock voiced that trust in his "Don't you believe in the Holy Spirit?" comment to the assembled Liverpool delegates for the National Pastoral Congress quoted at the beginning of this talk.

The heart of this learning process in the Church does not lie in the passing on of correct teaching from one generation to the next. Revelation, or Tradition, is not a block of objective knowledge committed to the apostles by Jesus and passed down from age to age. In his book, *The Theology of Vatican II* (London, 1967), Bishop Butler states that 'a revelation is not fully given until it is received'. In other words revelation is a living reality which occurs in every generation in the sense that the process of self-discovery in Christ has to be worked through by the church in every age and in each culture. The Word of God being received and appropriated in each generation is the living process of revelation. That is the heart of Christian tradition.

As Christians we are all teachers. This is true within the learning community of the church. We all share our faith with each other and thus help on the growth process in the body of the church - parents,

teachers and catechists doing this in a very crucial way. By virtue of our baptism we also share in the missionary function of the church. ‘Go and teach all nations’ is a word of the Lord spoken to all of us. This is put forward very forcefully by Paul VI in his Apostolic Letter, *Evangelization in the modern world*, following the 1974 Synod of Bishops. In this letter the pope seems to opt for the learning frame of reference rather than the teaching one when he says: “In fact, the proclamation only reaches full development when it is listened to, accepted and assimilated, and when it arouses a genuine adherence in the one who has thus received it” (n 23). In other words, the heart of evangelization does not lie in what we do but rather in what happens in the hearts and minds of those with whom we are trying to share the gospel. This links in with one of the insights of modern literary theory. There is a dynamic interaction between the text and the reader, between the word and the listener. The reader or listener brings his or her own experience into their interpretation of the text or their reception of the spoken word. How often the same homily conveys a different message for different people. Yet this should not be surprising. The gospel is not being defended in the face of an enemy. It is being shared by people who, deep in their being, are hungry for the word of God.

What about the teaching authority of the pope and the bishops?

Again it depends on whether one adopts the teaching frame of reference or the learning one. If we go for a rigid teaching model, the pope and the bishops are in an impossible position. They would need to be one-person universities – experts in bible, theology, philosophy, ethics, pastoral care, church history, etc. Obviously that is humanly impossible.

If a learning model is accepted as the prime process, the leadership role of the pope and bishops lies within rather than outside the learning process. They remain 100% members of the learning community. Their particular function is to facilitate the learning process within the community. It is worth exploring what this role would mean within the church.

First:

- ultimately the Holy Spirit is the one teacher in the Christian community - the life-giving spirit of truth which Christ has breathed into his church.
- This Spirit permeates the whole church and so those exercising ‘teaching authority’, whether pope, bishop or head of the

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, should not see themselves as the repository of all wisdom and knowledge or as having some kind of 'hot-line' to God. Gerard Hughes offers a timely warning on this point: 'We cannot confidently lay claim to the guidance of the Spirit, whether as individuals or as a church, unless we take the normal human means to try to arrive at the truth' (cf. 'Natural law ethics and moral theology', in *The Month*, 1987, p.103).

- They will see themselves very much as listeners, trying to discern all the riches of the Spirit's wisdom coming through different members of the community.
- when they discern the voice of the Spirit, coming from whatever quarter, they will see it as part of their role to enable that voice to be heard as widely as possible in the church.

Second:

- Vatican II has made us more aware that the Spirit-guided learning community must not be restricted to the Roman Catholic church. Even outside the gathering of Christian believers, the learning process is going on and the Spirit of God is active.
- Only if the church is true to the listening and learning dimension of its teaching role in each age and culture will the heart of revelation be clothed in the best riches of the world's true self-understanding (Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, nn.58 & 44).

Third:

- Dialogue is an essential part of teaching according to the learning model. In his very first homily as Pope at his Mass with the Cardinals, Benedict XVI laid great emphasis on dialogue, mentioning it no less than four times in the course of a very brief sermon.
- Listening and speaking lie at the heart of genuine dialogue which is directed partly towards listening and learning and partly towards sharing one's own beliefs and convictions.
- Cardinal Walter Kasper has recently stressed the ecumenical importance of dialogue – it helps us to become truly catholic: "The truth is always bigger than our formulas. None of us has the truth, but the truth has us. Through dialogue, with its exchange of gifts, we don't reach a new truth, but we come to a fuller understanding

of the truth, which we believe we have in Jesus Christ. This is the dynamic dimension which helps us discover our full 'catholicity'.

- The late Jacques Dupuis remarks on the importance of dialogue in the field of inter-faith relations: "The same God is present and acting in both dialogue partners". It involves "getting inside the skin of the other, walking in the other's shoes, seeing the world as the other sees it, asking the other's questions." Dialogue is something sacred: "The same God speaks in the heart of both partners, the same Spirit is at work in both."

Fourth:

- Dialogue can offer an interesting model for 'teaching statements'.
- Roman Catholic authorities can be open to the temptation of thinking that all church statements should be infallible or at least 100% certain! In fact, such an expectation is normally virtually impossible. So a different temptation raises its head – either the church is silent when a some kind of tentative statement could be helpful to the debate, or else it claims a level of authority for its statements which they will not bear
- In the dialogue model, church statements can be seen as contributions to an on-going conversation – "I may be wrong, but...". In my book, *New Directions in Sexual Ethics* (Continuum, London, 1998), I explore statements from various churches in the light of that model. (cf. chap 5, especially pp.96-99)
- The way the US bishops went about the writing of their two pastoral letters on peace and the economy are good examples of this dialogue process in action. Draft versions were made public and comments were invited from all and sundry. The reason why the document on *The Common Good* published by the Bishops Conference of England and Wales had such a major impact, apart from the richness of its content and its accessibility, may have been because it was presented not as a dogmatic statement but as a serious contribution to the thinking of the nation prior to an important General Election.

Fifth:

- The role of articulating the community's grasp of the truth when it reaches sufficient clarity and agreement clearly demands attentive listening and careful discernment.

- It includes listening to earlier teaching, as is witnessed to by the wise saying of a medieval theologian: “We see further than our forebears. We are like dwarfs sitting on shoulders of giants.”
- Yet it also includes accepting the possibility of a development of doctrine or even of a change of teaching when a growth in moral sensitivity in the human family makes us aware that certain things we held as true in the past are now seen to be erroneous or at least in need of a radical re-statement. This has occurred with regard to slavery and certain aspects of our self-understanding in the area of sexuality. It is an on-going refining and reforming process that we can expect to continue in the future. If teaching develops or changes, this must be acknowledged and the reasons for it be understood. We cannot deny our past.
- Christian tradition is something alive and active. Healthy development and change is not a betrayal of our forebears. It is being faithful to the living tradition they handed on to us.

Sixth:

- Prophecy is not linked necessarily to the role of the teacher, though some teachers in the church have also been prophets;
- However, part of the teacher's role is to listen out for the voice of the prophet and then enable that voice to be heard as widely as possible.
- In that sense, it could be argued that the most important exercise of teaching authority last century was the calling of Vatican II by Pope John XXIII. He enabled the prophetic voices in the community to be heard by the whole church.

What about dissent from authoritative teaching in the church?

Provided it is not tantamount to the denial of the heart of our Christian faith, within the learning frame of reference there is room for dissent in the church. Personally, I prefer the term ‘disagreement’ to ‘dissent’ since it is more in keeping with the conversational model. Within the teaching model dissent usually involves confrontation, since it is virtually saying to the ‘teaching authority’, “You, the teacher, are wrong. You are in error”. Despite that, it is still allowed for in exceptional circumstances in the traditional manuals of theology.

In the learning model, disagreement (more appropriately than dissent) need not involve any confrontation with the teacher. Since it is simply claiming that the articulation of the teaching put forward by the teacher does not do justice to the full riches of what the church really believes. Hence, rather than being seen as a negative confrontation, it presents itself as an attempt to collaborate in church's teaching ministry. A helpful, though not infallible, indicator of its value may be found in the reaction of the rest of the community, especially those most intimately involved in that specific issue, especially through their own experience. That is why the 'non-reception' of some of the church's teaching on sexual and marital issues cannot be dismissed too easily. It has even been suggested that such 'non-reception' is actually the dynamic action of the Holy Spirit in the minds and hearts of those who know the truth of the matter in the light of their own experience. After all, it was Cardinal Hume who reminded the Rome Synod on the Family in 1980 that the experience of Christian married couples is a genuine source for the church's understanding of the theology of marriage.

Collaboration in the church's mission of teaching and evangelization is a privilege and responsibility of us all. The church will be truly honouring collaboration in this aspect of its mission when the voice of the Spirit is heard and listened to, through whomsoever it speaks and from whatever unlikely quarter it might come.

III QUEST AND THE TEACHING MINISTRY IN THE CHURCH

"Arising from your experience, what would you say to the Pope if you had the chance to speak to him?" "I could put my message into one word: Listen. Listen to people's stories so that we can discover the sacred in them. The difficulty I have with the church and the hierarchy is a positive inability to listen to people's stories, so they're not dealing with a movement I believe to be of God's spirit." This was the answer given by a US Catholic priest who had been ministering to gay men US living with HIV/AIDS. (cf. *New Directions in Sexual Ethics*, p. 70)

Another person commented: "AIDS has opened a door between gay people and the church. It has been an agent prompting reflection on sexuality...They see heroism and selfless activity in the gay community. They come to ask: How could this be bad? How could this be what the church is telling us it is?" (*op cit*, p.94)

The word “Listen” has cropped up frequently in our reflecting on collaborative ministry and the church’s teaching ministry – seen from a learning/teaching perspective. Last year the Bishops of England and Wales launched a ‘Listening 2004’ project. Like many such things, it seemed to go off half-cock. However, one fruit of it was an Assembly here in Liverpool which I attended and which I found quite remarkable. From morning until tea-time one Saturday over 100 people, including our bishops, listened to what people throughout the diocese had been saying on the theme, ‘My Family, My Church’.

One of the presentations was entitled ‘Joe’s Story’. Let me read you part of it:

Joe’s Story.

Our son's name is Joe. He was 33 last week. Joe was a lovely child, the happiest baby going, full of life as a toddler and buzzing with energy and love of life. As he got older he always seemed to be involved in things and had lots of hobbies and interests. But as he got into his mid teens, he became quiet and subdued. He stopped mixing and would withdraw from many social situations. He became moody and irritable. We put this down to the teenage blues and were concerned but felt it would all pass in time. It didn't. He started to be skitted at school and had episodes of real misery, not wanting to go out any more. We were at our wits end -.what had happened to our lovelyyoung son? We talked with him, tried to get him to talk to us, we shared our anxieties with some of our closest friends, talked with our doctor. Nothing seemed to help. One night we came home to find he had swallowed a lot of tablets and was unconscious. A rush to hospital followed and...well, I won't go on. But to cut a long story short, what emerged that was that Joe had started to realise that he was gay.

Although we accepted him completely and continued to give him all our love, Joe despised himself, felt different, as if there were something wrong with him. There followed many years of unhappiness and he attempted suicide on two more occasions. He found it difficult to accept himself. His self-esteem was at rock bottom and there was little joy in his life. His sense of being different dominated his existence and ours.

And then, when he was about 26 or 27, he met Brian, a lovely fellow. They had such a lot in common. They started to meet

up regularly and then had a holiday, something Joe hadn't done for years. He started to pick up hobbies and interests again instead of drowning himself in work and TV.

That was 6 years ago. They have been living as partners for the last 5 years and these days Joe is much more like a grown up version of the lively youngster we knew. He is happy, fulfilled, enjoys life and is involved in all sorts of worthwhile activity. He is a fantastic uncle to his nieces and nephews. My wife and I are so delighted to see him happy again and thank God daily that he has come through those terrible times. I know this is another of the stories, where things aren't right by the book but to us it feels as if salvation has come to our son.

Perhaps to anyone here there is nothing remarkable in that story. It might even reflect some of your own personal experience.

What I found remarkable on that Saturday was the complete and unquestioning acceptance of how Joe's parents feel at the end of the story. Remember their closing words in the story: "Salvation has come to our son".

One of my favourite theological pieces is a sentence by Jack Mahoney where he describes theology as "making faith-sense of experience and making experience-sense of faith". Those parents had done precisely that by describing his experience in terms of "salvation".

Margaret Rogers, one of the organisers of that Saturday's listening session, finished her presentation in this way:-

"What has been highlighted is how much love and energy go into creating and supporting the family, whatever shape or structure it may have. It is an awesome task, truly worthy of the name vocation. It is what occupies most of our time. This daily working and reworking of relationship embodies the mystery of life – of creation, growth and resurrection.

How can we, as church, find ways of giving due emphasis to this business of living and relating that people are finding so challenging? Because when it goes wrong, people really do perish.

Families (relationships) can be places of love, support, warmth, tenderness, fun & joy. (CREATION)

They can also be places of bitterness, hurt, harshness, cruelty, abuse & domination. (THE FALL)

It is through the daily struggle (REDEMPTIVE LOVE) that families (relationships) become communities of love (SALVATION)."

The other organiser of the Liverpool Listening assembly, Fr Tony Slingo, began his final summary with a very challenging statement: "When it works, Church is massively important for people. When it doesn't work, it is massively wounding. The voice of the families challenge me about making room at the table." He pointed out that the church can be rigid, judgemental, excluding, rejecting and cruel when people do not come up to the church's norm. And this is made all the worse when it is a norm to do with personal relationships and one which does not seem to fit with the reality of people's lives. In Jack Mahoney's phrase, it is a norm which does not make "experience sense of faith". The result is legalised exclusion or people withdrawing and hiding away. Tony closed his reflection by saying: "There seems to be a call for our Catholic culture to continue broadening out to value much more visibly what is good human living in itself and not only what is fully paid-up, card-carrying officially Catholic".

What has all this to do with collaborative ministry? Collaborative ministry is based on the theology of communion. In other words, it goes in the opposite direction to exclusion. It is about having a place at the table – not by invitation of the priest or bishop, but by invitation of the Host who is notorious for his open hospitality. All kinds are welcome at the table. It is a gathering of wounded people – and that means all of us. It involves the patience needed for the seed to grow, even in the midst of choking weeds, as the parable of the darnel reminds us. (cf. my *From a Parish Base*, ch. 7, especially pp.107-111) Disputes and conflicts have their place around the table. They should not be covered over or hidden away, as in a dysfunctional family. *The Sign We Give* makes that point very strongly in its section, 'Learning to deal with conflict' (p.30-31): "If collaboration is to grow, conflict must be brought into the open. It can be paralysing when it remains hidden. The courage to face and work through conflict... are not weaknesses, but signs of maturity and commitment."

What does the teaching on collaborative ministry say to *Quest* members in terms of your involvement in the learning/teaching ministry of the church?

Most of all, value your place at the table. You are a gift to the other guests, as they are to you. Often cruel and rigid opposition to gays and lesbians is due to people never having had the healing, grace-filled experience of personal contact with gay or lesbians, whether individuals or couples. You in *Quest* are uniquely qualified to remedy this. It is only people like yourselves who can help the church find the appropriate language for making 'faith-sense' and 'experience-sense' of the lives of gay and lesbian members of the church.

When Christians in general began to be challenged by the 'grace-filled' experience of gay partners living lives which carried all the marks of a 'lovingrelationship' - and so revelatory of God - the initial reaction of theologians like myself was that this experience must be listened to. However, that initial reaction presumed that heterosexual theologians like myself would do the listening. We would examine the experience presented to us and then evaluate whether we need to reformulate our sexual theology to take account of what we had learnt in this process.

In this reaction we were missing the point! The language about homosexuality which we had all been brought up on was not adequate for expressing the positive experience of gays and lesbians. Hence, new ways of speaking about gay and lesbian experience had to be found. Initially, this could only be done by gay people like yourselves since it was your experience as persons which was being expressed. Gay theology can only be done by gay people. James Allison is an outstanding example of this.

Moreover, what theologians like myself were failing to appreciate was that gay Christians seeking to articulate their experience are actually 'doing theology'. Finding the right language is actually part of the theological process. This kind of work needs to be accepted gratefully by the Church as a rich contribution to its on-going commitment to the truth. Without this kind of theological reflection and its public expression, there is no possibility of real dialogue on this issue in the Church. And without dialogue there is no collaborative ministry in searching the truth.

Of course, to present the Gospel positively as genuine 'good news' for gay men and lesbians does not mean that the Gospel does not

challenge them to eradicate from their lives whatever violates the dignity of persons or is destructive of personal and social relationships. Part of a more open dialogue towards a positive spirituality for homosexual persons will surely need to have on its agenda how to discern which kinds of gay and lesbian relationship are expressive of genuine love and which are abusive of persons. And also which kinds can develop the capacity to sustain faithful loving commitments and which prevent growth in personal and emotional maturity. These same questions apply equally to heterosexual relationships. I have never forgotten the comment of my US Jesuit friend, Jon Fuller, an expert in integrated HIV/AIDS care: "There is nothing as similar to heterosexuality as homosexuality. They are both about loving persons precisely as persons."

Sexuality is a dimension to our being human persons which we all share, even though modified by our sexual orientation. As a Christian, I believe that this sexual dimension is an important aspect of our being made persons in the image of a relational, loving and life-giving God. We are most true to ourselves as sexual human persons, therefore, to the extent that we realise the potentiality of our sexuality by going out to each other in love, by joyfully expressing that love in a way which is appropriate to the character and depth of our relationships and by contributing to the life-giving enterprise of receiving our human existence as gift and accepting our responsibility to prepare a future worth passing on to future generations.

A Christian sexual ethics which is able to embrace and express the positive goodness to be found in loving gay and lesbian relationships should be all the richer – and Christian - since it is now based on a more comprehensive appreciation of the giftedness of the human person. Such a positive evaluation would help gays and lesbians to feel that "it is wonderful for us to be here".

I am suggesting that *Quest* members have the privilege – and responsibility – of making their own unique contribution to that positive evaluation. A task which, in today's climate, will often be painful and which, sadly and tragically, will sometimes be met with rejection.

I have never ceased to wonder at the semi-mystical experience Thomas Merton had in a shopping mall in Louisville when he was suddenly overwhelmed by his oneness in God with the vast throng of people all around even though all total strangers. He was inspired to write:

“How can you tell people that they are all walking around shining like the sun...? If only we could see ourselves and each other through the eyes of God. I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other” (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, London, Sheldon Press, 1977 edition, pp.153-5).

God's Kingdom will come a stage nearer for our Catholic community when we are prepared to fall down and 'worship' our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters as the persons they really are in the eyes of God!

Collaboration or Collusion? Working Together for a Truthful Church

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Let me begin by confessing that the term 'collaborative ministry' sets up some resistance in me. It makes me think of people with flip charts and spider diagrams, and eager parishioners organizing endless committee meetings, usually remaining more or less deferential to 'Father' who oversees proceedings and can be relied upon to intervene pretty quickly if anything too radical seems about to happen.

However, that's a reductive view of collaborative ministry and I have decided to widen the focus rather dramatically. I want to talk about what it means to be collaborators with God in the ongoing work of creation, for that is surely what all ministry is ultimately about. This means considering ministry from three perspectives: creation, sacramentality, and personhood. My argument in a nutshell is this: all ministry arises out of the fact that we are beings created by God who are uniquely called to participate in the ongoing work of creation. Our human ministry therefore flows out of our sacramental relationship to the rest of creation, a relationship that is sustained and nurtured through the sacramental life of the Church. But ministry is also rooted in the person: personal authenticity goes hand in hand with authentic, life-giving ministry. Our life in Christ is our lifelong learning about the nature of personhood, bearing in mind that all personhood derives from the relationships of persons within the Trinity. Christ models personhood for us, and walks side by side with us as we learn – and often fail – to get it right. I want to situate my discussion in that context of creation, sacramentality and personhood, as the matrix within which all true and faithful ministry is nurtured.

James Alison speaks of the difficulty of trying to shift our understanding of the place of forgiveness in the Christian story, from that of ‘God dealing with sin’ to that of ‘God wanting us to share in the act of creation from the inside’.¹ Ministry is this sharing in the act of creation from the inside – a creation which is not a big bang that constitutes a chronological beginning, but a sustaining and ongoing activity which holds all that is in being. Creation is God’s desire that there should be something rather than nothing, and it is this desire which keeps the cosmos in being against the pervasive impotence of death, dissolution and nothingness. If we understand creation in this way, it must also affect our understanding of ministry. It is in so far as we are persons who create space for other persons to be, for creation itself to be in such a way that it reveals the glory of God, that we minister collaboratively with God and with one another. Perhaps this is what St. Paul refers to when he says that

the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in the hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (*Romans* 8:19-20)

The task of the children of God is to liberate creation from futility into freedom and glory, and that is surely the vision that informs every act of Christian ministry, however menial or routine it might appear to be.

But this also means that authentic ministry flows out of worship. The Church is the space of God’s new creation. It is the dramatic space in which we express that which we believe is now and not yet: God’s eternity here among us, and still to be fulfilled at the end of time. The Church has always understood her liturgical life as a foretaste of heaven on earth. In the liturgy, we enter time out of time, rupturing the boundaries that hold us in time and place, giving bodily expression to our hope in a way that flows out beyond the liturgy itself, to permeate all of creation. Thus, although our liturgical enactment is always a performance *in absentia* – an affirmation of the real presence of Christ against the lack or the absence that we perceive – and it is always filtered through culture and human perceptions and therefore always limited in its capacity to communicate truth and meaning, the liturgy should nevertheless be a time of grace and revelation. The rhythms, gestures and cadences of our

¹ James Alison, *On Being Liked*: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003, p. xiii.

liturgical performance suspend the ordinary and draw us into the cosmic wedding feast of Christ and the Church. Here, we inhabit God's new creation, and we become recipients and channels of grace which flow through us and beyond us into all the daily routines and ministries of life.

When our ministry, which is our collaboration in God's creation, is nurtured by this awareness of its heavenly dimension, it becomes a work of spirit and truth. This means that ministry comes about when we experience the generosity of spirit which comes from having a sense of being created, loved and accepted by God. Only in the awareness that, before we create we are created, before we love we are loved, can we ourselves experience the glorious freedom of being the children of God. As James Alison so eloquently recognizes, it is in being liked by God that we are able to like others:

the word *like* in all its gentleness is the word appropriate for the extraordinarily unbothered, non-emergency power we mean by creation. It is that gentle liking that is the sign of a power which could not be in greater contrast with the power of the satanic. A power so gentle and so huge that we are able not to be afraid. In the midst of the false manufacturing of meaning and frightening power displayed by the satanic, we are being taught that our being liked and held in being is at the hands of something infinitely more powerful, infinitely restful, and we can live without fear.²

Ministry, then, is not our bustling around being terribly busy with parish affairs. It is the creative rest – the sabbath perhaps – which is nurtured in worship and expressed in liking. It is a way of being in the world that allows others to be, because it is the manifestation of a gentle, huge and fearless power in a world seduced by violence and hypnotically mesmerized by terror. I wonder how many of us dare to minister in that way – to minister not by taking on extra work and committing more and more of our time, but by freeing up time in order to be and to hold others in being. As someone who seems to spend most of my life rushing from one appointment to another and always arriving late, I remember reading an article that said being busy can become a form of sloth, because it means we never have to think creatively about how we use our time. In our age of commodification, we never have free time. Even our leisure time is commodified, paid for and organized, and we all know

² Ibid, pp. 15-16.

how easy it is to slip into habits of busy-ness where ministry too becomes one more chore. It is very difficult to allow ourselves that time and space of prayer, reflection and tranquillity, which empowers us to minister to others because we have time to be free with and for them.

When our ministry arises, not out of a sense of urgency and anxiety but out of a sense of being at peace with ourselves and our world, it becomes spontaneous. It's what we do when we're not aware that we're doing it. As we find ourselves liked by God, as we begin to see ourselves, not as chaotic, distorted forces in the world but as persons who are loved and wanted as we are, we become free to love others. As we feel our needs being met, so we become aware of the needs of others. All the great mystics emphasize the importance of self-knowledge. It is when we can stand before Christ and see ourselves as we really are – see ourselves as he sees us, and know that he loves what he sees – that we can bring others to Christ and Christ to others through our joy and freedom.

Perhaps we see an example of this ministry when we read the story of the Samaritan woman at the well in John's Gospel. The Catechism situates its discussion of prayer in the context of the encounter between Christ and the Samaritan woman:

The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God's desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him.³

The *Catechism* goes on to say that 'it is the *heart* that prays. ... The heart is the dwelling-place where I am, where I live ... The heart is our hidden centre, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others; only the Spirit of God can fathom the human heart and know it fully.' The heart is, says the *Catechism*, 'the place of truth ... the place of encounter ... the place of covenant.'⁴

Desire, truth, encounter, covenant. Like the Samaritan woman, we experience Christ's desire for us, his thirst for us. Like her, perhaps we suspect some kind of trap. We banter, flirt, play games, avoid the

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1999, p. 544, n. 2560.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 545, n. 2563.

question. Christ is patient, playful but persistent in his responses. Thus we come to encounter the truth about ourselves, we come to realize that Christ's desire is not for the mask, not for the *persona*, but for the person I am. He desires my heart, my dwelling-place, the place where I am. I don't need to posture or pretend to be who I am not. The Samaritan woman is empowered and able to witness to the glory of Christ, because he liberates her from futility into freedom – the futility of endless broken relationships and deceptions, into the freedom of being known and accepted as part of the glory of God's creation: 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!' she tells the people in the city. (*John* 4:29) But Christ not only enables the woman to say, 'I am'. He also reveals to her who he is: 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.' (*John* 8:26) This 'I am' is my space of rest in my own being, and it becomes a space of rest when Christ makes his being in me. It reminds us that to be is never to be alone. I am because you are, and we all are because God is, and God is three in one and one in three. Unity in diversity and relationality.

But how many have found in Christ's Church that space of gentle acceptance, that space of being liked in a way that gives us permission to be fully ourselves? How many experience the Church's liturgical life as a window into heaven, where we encounter a God who desires us and thirsts for us just as we are? What can Catholic feminists and gays learn from one another as we seek Christ's face through the veils of a liturgical life that so often seems designed to exclude and conceal rather than to include and reveal? How can we explore a space of being in a Church that often seems to welcome us only if we hide behind masks, only if we refuse to reveal who we are in all the muddled vulnerability of our love and desire?

In asking these questions, I hope to avoid some of the liberal rhetoric that has informed much feminist and gay and lesbian theology in the past. I share the concern that Elizabeth Stuart and others have expressed that Christian liberalism is bankrupt in its ability to inform the kind of theological reflection we need with regard to the significance of the body and sexuality in their capacity to reveal God. Stuart points to the disillusionment with liberalism among Christians who recognize that 'the world has to be set within the story of God, not vice versa. [T]here must be something more to ... moral theology than the

proclamation of secular ethics in a churchy voice.⁵ Stuart situates her discussion of sexuality and the body in the context of baptism. Referring to the former Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, she writes:

Through baptism human beings are transformed from being atomized individuals and taken into the very life of the Trinitarian God that is incarnated in the Church. The ontology of the baptized is radically changed, they become what might be called ecclesial persons. As Ratzinger notes, this personhood is characterized by a new subjectivity which is communal and corporate, for it both shares in and constitutes the body of Christ, the new human.⁶

I want to discuss this idea of personhood in the context of sacramentality, but I want to begin by considering Ratzinger/Benedict's theology of personhood more closely, by turning to the 1986 Letter to the Catholic Bishops on *The Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under his signature. In his critical commentary on the CDF letter, Andrew Sullivan detects a subtle but significant shift in the Church's theology of the person, through the letter's repeated use of that phrase 'the homosexual person'.

On first reading, the letter gives little cause for celebration. Although it condemns violence against homosexuals, it reiterates the earlier teaching that homosexual actions are 'intrinsically disordered'⁷ It goes on to say that, 'Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder.'⁸ I do not have time to unpack this statement in order to expose all its theological ambiguities, except to say that it is based on a deeply problematic appeal to natural law and to the Genesis story. It asserts that God created the sexes as complementary, and therefore God intends human beings to be heterosexual. Thus, 'It is only

⁵ Elizabeth Stuart, 'Sexuality: The View from the Font (The Body and the Ecclesial Self)', *Theology & Sexuality*, Vol. 11, September 1999: 9-20, p. 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁷ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 'Letter to the Catholic Bishops on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons', in Eugene F. Jr. Rogers (ed.), *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Oxford and Malden MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002 [1986], p. 250.

⁸ *Ibid.*

in the marital relationship that the use of the sexual faculty can be morally good.⁹ Moreover, insofar as it is unable to transmit life, homosexual activity ‘thwarts the call to a life of that form of self-giving which the Gospel says is the essence of Christian living.’¹⁰ But if that is true, then a married couple who have sex knowing that one of them is infertile must also be guilty of thwarting that call to transmit life. Yet today, the Church’s teaching does not say that: it acknowledges that infertility does not prevent sexual intercourse from expressing the love and unity of the couple. As soon as that is acknowledged, then one of the fundamental arguments against homosexual relations based on the appeal to natural law is undermined.

But Sullivan makes a more important theological point. He argues that, in referring to the homosexual person, the CDF has radically undermined its own position regarding homosexuality. In its 1975 *Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics*, the CDF made a distinction between homosexuality as a transitory condition, and homosexuality as an innate disposition. Sullivan points out that this was the first time that the modern Church acknowledged that homosexuals are not just bad heterosexuals: they constitute a group in nature who conform to a different way of being human. He goes on to argue that, when the 1986 letter uses the term ‘homosexual person’, it uses the concept of the person in a theological sense:

The term ‘person’ constitutes in Catholic moral teaching a profound statement about the individual’s humanity, dignity and worth; it invokes a whole range of rights and needs; it reflects the recognition by the Church that a homosexual person deserves exactly the same concern and compassion as a heterosexual person, having all the rights of a human being, and all the value, in the eyes of God. ... What in 1975 had been ‘a pathological constitution judged to be incurable’ was, eleven years later, a ‘homosexual person,’ ‘made in the image and likeness of God.’¹¹

Sullivan also makes the point that, even as the homosexual person is acknowledged, all acts associated with that person’s sexual self-expression

⁹ Ibid, p. 252.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Andrew Sullivan, ‘Alone Again, Naturally: The Catholic Church and the Homosexual’, Ibid., 2002, p. 281.

are condemned even more robustly than they were before. So not even two cheers for Ratzinger, but I do want to bear in mind that understanding of the person as a being whose sexual orientation is a dimension of what it means to be a person, and therefore what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God. In particular, I want to ask what it means to say this in the context of ecclesial personhood and sacramentality.

The sacramental life is our baptismal way of being in the world. It is that form of life which is uniquely able to nurture and express the ecclesial personhood of those who live in Christ. Through the sacraments of the Church, but also through the cultivation of a sacramental vision which graces every aspect of our lives, we learn what it means to be divinized, participating in that insight common to patristic thinkers and medieval mystics that ‘God became human, so that we might become God.’ After centuries of an anthropological vision which has tended to see the human more as a miserable worm than as a divine creature, the western Church might rediscover from the Orthodox Church this idea of *theosis*, the divinization of the human in Christ. Our becoming divine is a life in which we are sacramentally nurtured by the Church in order that we ourselves might be sacramental presences in the world, embodying Christ among us and within us. But only an infinitely abundant and diverse humanity can begin to show the world the infinite generosity and beauty of God in the creation of the world and in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The more diversity the Church encompasses within her vision of the human, the more truthfully she represents the organic life of Christ, the new human, in the world. And that is surely as true of our sexuality and gender as it is of all our other human characteristics. Age, class, race, disability, nationality – there is a very long list today which demonstrates the inclusivity of modern Catholicism, and perhaps it is that very inclusivity which makes us so acutely aware of the one area where the Church is not inclusive, but seeks to exclude human beings on the basis of sexual otherness, whether we are talking about the exclusion of the female body from sacramental representation, or the exclusion of homosexuality as a way of being before God.

In talking about sacramentality, we also need to talk about truthfulness. Christ told the Samaritan woman that God desires those who worship in spirit and in truth, and he offered her streams of living water so that she would never go thirsty again. We all know how difficult it is to experience the sacraments as that elemental space where our thirst

is quenched by streams of living water, when we are conscious of some level of denial or dishonesty about what we are doing and why. We can feel as if the wells have been poisoned, when the sacraments become a vehicle for a particular ideology or moral stance, instead of being that space of creative risk and adventure where time and eternity encounter one another in every body gathered together at the altar. But when some of those bodies are told that they cannot represent Christ because they are women, and others are told that they are tolerated on the understanding that they are intrinsically disordered and more prone than most to moral evil, then grace becomes filtered through bodies trapped in a lie, and the food of life bears the taint of deception for those of us who hunger and thirst for its sustaining power.

Alison speaks about the mendacity of the Church's teaching on homosexuality. We are, he points out, discovering

an anthropological truth which ... has become available to us precisely because of the truth of the Gospel. ... [W]hat we are discovering about being human is quite simple: that there are certain human beings who, for reasons which are not clear to anyone, are, irrespective of cultural differences, and of social mores, principally attracted at a profound emotional and erotic level to members of their own sex; that this is, in the vast majority of cases, a lifelong attraction, and that such people flourish and are happy when they find themselves able to develop somewhat the same forms of human life as others, principally the ability to tell the truth, and secondarily the ability to relate to others in a straightforward and transparent way, including the possibility of forming lifelong partnerships with others of their free choice. In other words, we are discovering that there are such things as gay people, and that their flourishing happens in exactly the same way, *mutatis mutandis*, as that of everybody else. Which is to say that they are not defective heterosexuals, but just are that way.¹²

In the Church's refusal to countenance the revelation inherent in this way of being human, we are, suggests Alison, 'inhabiting ... an area of mendacity ... a field formed by a dishonesty that is both structural and

¹² Alison, *On Being Liked*, pp. 84-85.

customary, rather than an area of erroneous doctrine.¹³ Alison points to the recognition by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in its document *Ad tuendam fidem* that there are different orders of truth. He argues that we need to distinguish between doctrines which are essential to our salvation, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, the incarnation, and the resurrection, and other teachings which relate to 'who we are who are being saved.'¹⁴ In other words, perhaps we could say that it is the Church's anthropology rather than her theology as such that is at fault, although of course the two can never be separated. Our understanding of who we are and our understanding of who God is will always to some extent be inter-dependent, and revelation is always filtered through the bodily realities of human experience in its cultural, linguistic and historical contexts. But when our understanding of the human is limited, not by the mere fact of our mortality and finitude and by the mystery of our capacity for transcendence, but by a refusal to acknowledge that something new is being revealed to us about what it means to be human, then our openness to God's ongoing disclosure of the divine image becomes distorted by our commitment to particular cultural and ethical norms which freeze the drama of God's becoming among us and our becoming in God.

The challenge that confronts Catholic feminists, gays and lesbians is to ask how we might become collaborators in truth, rather than colluding in mendacity. As different groups with considerable overlap who have come to recognize deficiencies in the Church's understanding of what it means to be human in the image of God, what different insights might we offer one another as a way of ministering to Christ's truth by ministering to the truth of the sexual other among us – whatever form that otherness takes?

I have already referred to the inadequacy of liberal theology to address such questions in the context of the Christian story. As a feminist theologian, I do not think the methods and assumptions of either liberal or post-modern feminist theology are adequate to help us to think through these questions, although that is not to deny that feminist theologians pioneered a way to ask questions that we have never been able to ask before. From a theological perspective, there are significant problems with both the experiential approach that informs liberal

¹³ Ibid, p. 83.

¹⁴ Ibid.

feminism, and the cultural linguistic approach that informs post-modern feminism. The appeal to experience risks over-privileging the body at the expense of language, while post-modern theology risks over-privileging language at the expense of the body. As I see it, the way beyond this dilemma is the recovery of a sense of sacramentality, understood not only in the doctrinal sense of the Church's sacraments, but through a reawakening of a sacramental consciousness that allows us to see the shimmer of grace in all that exists, so that the world around us – including our own bodies – becomes a complex, subtle and textured form of revelation continuously unfolding within us and around us.

In searching for a theology capable of informing this graced vision, Thomas Aquinas is a good place to start, for he offers us a lens through which to view ourselves in relation to God and creation. For Aquinas, we come to know ourselves and God first and foremost through our sensory awareness of the world around us. We begin, not with the Cartesian 'I' who finds absolute certainty within himself [sic] – 'I think therefore I am' – and then projects out of that a sense of certainty about the world. Rather, for Thomas it is as we become conscious of our capacity to experience and reflect upon the material world that we become aware of ourselves as thinking beings, and the more deeply we allow ourselves to experience the mystery of the world around us through revelation, prayer and reasoned philosophical reflection, the more aware we become of the absolute otherness and mystery of God. But because we are made in the image and likeness of God, this increasing sense of God's mystery translates into a sense of the mystery of our own being. The more like God we become, the more we know that we do not know God, and therefore our union with God – our becoming like God – is a space of unknowing. This has two important implications for what I want to say today.

First, it invites us to trust the material world, including our own bodies, as revelatory. The God of Jesus Christ is the God who created the universe, and the God revealed in Christ is therefore consistent with the God revealed in creation – even although, for Thomas, the grace that is offered in Christ leads to a more truthful and perfect knowledge than the natural grace inherent in creation. So, while we may indeed be suspicious of all grand narratives in our post-modern world, recognizing as we do their power to oppress and silence so many fragile narratives of individual and social becoming, we should not allow this to translate into a distrust

of the material world in its capacity to reveal something of God's truth. This means resisting the kind of suspicion that informs some post-modern theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler and, to a lesser extent, Luce Irigaray, for whom matter has no innate significance or meaning outside language. It also means resisting the kind of Protestant theology in which the natural grace of creation is negated in favour of a theology in which grace is exclusively filtered through Christian revelation, to such an extent that only the person who explicitly acknowledges Christ is capable of experiencing grace. As Catholics, we are shaped by a theological tradition which affirms that God made a world that is very good, and even although that world is damaged by alienation, suffering and death – in order words, the effects of sin – it is still a world that reveals God's glory to the attentive human mind. We have no access to God at all outside of creation, and it is through our wonder at the mystery of creation, including the mystery of our own being in creation, that we experience the mystery of God, and the mystical union between the self as mystery and God as mystery.

But the second point I want to make is that this consciousness of the ultimate mystery of God and the self should caution us against any form of essentialism that claims a direct link between God's self-revelation and the material world, as if bodies were some kind of script that we simply have to read correctly in order to decipher what God is about. The body thus becomes encoded so that it begins to function as a manufacturer's instruction manual. Follow this, and you will know how to use it properly. This is a static, frozen understanding of revelation, but it is a deeply pernicious trend in contemporary Catholic sexual theology, particularly under the influence of Hans Urs von Balthasar. In the beginning, God created two and only two kinds of human – male and female, in that order. He told them to go forth and multiply, and that is the prototype, brought to fulfilment in the relationship between Christ/Mary and the Church, and mirrored in the sex lives of all good Catholics except those who do not have sex at all, and even they participate in a kind of symbolic mirroring of the same.

But of course, this is where this heterosexual model fragments if we look at it too closely, because men are brides as well as priests, and the modern Mass thus becomes a nuptial consummation of gay love between manly priests and brides in drag, with the female body being an entirely redundant and unnecessary spectator looking in from the outside.

Consider, for example, the following paragraph from Pope John Paul II's 1988 letter on women, *Mulieris Dignitatem*:

all human beings - both women and men - are called through the Church, to be the 'Bride' of Christ, the Redeemer of the world. In this way 'being the bride', and thus the 'feminine' element, becomes a symbol of all that is 'human', according to the words of Paul: 'There is neither male nor female; for you are *all one* in Christ Jesus' (*Gal. 3:28*).

From a linguistic viewpoint we can say that the analogy of spousal love found in the Letter to the Ephesians links what is 'masculine' to what is 'feminine', since, as members of the Church, men too are included in the concept of 'Bride'.¹⁵

I could discuss at some length the gender-bending of the Catholic theological tradition, but that is not my purpose here.¹⁶ What I do want to point out is that texts such as this are not rational explanations or biological definitions of sex and gender roles. They are poetic, the language is unstable and volatile, because it is in its capacity to rupture established meanings that theological language can be broken open to revelation. So even as John Paul II attempts to capture the body in its proper sacramental space – i.e. women cannot be priests because Jesus was a man – the sacramental body slips away and morphs into something else. Indeed, in acting out the nuptial love of Christ for the Church, we enter a sacramental space where sexual dualisms are thoroughly queered by the invocation of a multiplicity of shifting, dynamic gendered performances, whose restless mobility represents our way of seeking to express the inexpressible.

In the sacraments we become heavenly bodies – bodies birthed, nurtured, blessed, healed and redeemed by the risen Christ. Far from serving the purposes of a heterosexist social order, the sacramental understanding of gender militates against all sexual ideologies by its parodic, subversive unravelling of socially constructed norms. It is often said today – rightly in my view – that, whatever the gains of Vatican II, one of the losses was the mystical potency of pre-conciliar worship. But some in the Church today confuse mystery with mystification, and there

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*: Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women, London: Catholic Truth Society, 1988, n. 25.

¹⁶ For an exploration of this, see Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

are attempts to bring back the mystery by resorting to an ever greater mystification of sex and sacramentality. Perhaps the true mystery of God among us will shine out when Christ, the new human, is recognized not just in the male priest posing as the asexual heterosexual, but in a priesthood where holy desire draws close to us in the presence of the homosexual priest and the woman priest, inviting a new understanding of what celibacy and sexual love might mean in such contexts.

But this brings me to another point regarding personhood and authenticity, and that is the ways in which we understand desire and sin. In the Church today, both female bodies and gay bodies labour under the burden of a sense of sin which is rarely applied to the heterosexual male body. When we think about it, this is bizarre. Most violence in our world is perpetuated by men who claim to be heterosexual, from the violence of domestic abuse and the international sex trade, to the violence of war and terrorism and the implicit violence of the arms trade and the economic order. Alison makes the point that male rape has always been used as an expression of power and conquest, whether in the armies of the ancient world or in the modern American penitentiary system. He analyses this in the context of what he calls 'the grotesquely distorted relationships between males in general',¹⁷ and he suggests that it was the emergence of the women's movement that began to expose the myths inherent in the idea of male togetherness, not least because when women gain access to formerly all-male groups, the dynamics of desire are exposed. To quote Alison, women 'quickly detect, whether verbally or not, who is gay or not, simply because the lack of erotic tension is such a relief.'¹⁸ Alison suggests that this has in part contributed to the changes during the last fifty years, when, at least in some western societies, gay people have found themselves able to say 'I am', and the bastions of male togetherness have been breached. As Alison points out, this has been profoundly threatening for that thoroughly male environment of the Catholic priesthood which used to provide a safe environment for gay men. But he also argues that 'It is notorious in the Church that it is not "acting out" in same-sex acts which causes trouble, but rather talking about them, or saying "I am". ... [I]t is not sex, but honesty which threatens a certain form of being-male-together.'¹⁹

¹⁷ Alison, *On Being Liked*, p. 86.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 87.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 90.

What we have seen about this fundamental dishonesty is that the gay body now suffers as the female body has always suffered, through its over-identification with sinful sex. Traditionally, it has been the female body which has been represented as the greatest threat to male celibacy, as a result of which men have vigorously endeavoured to keep women cloistered, shut out and excluded. But now the enemy is within, for it is far more difficult to establish boundaries which keep gay men out of all-male communities – although we have recently seen rather febrile attempts in the Vatican to achieve this by suggesting that overt homosexuals are not suitable candidates for the priesthood.

Here, we find ourselves confronting the problem of desire – for desire has always been a complex problem in Catholic spirituality. It was only in the middle of the twentieth century that the Church began to acknowledge that sexual intercourse might have positive value in a marriage even when that marriage was infertile, although even today, as we well know, sexual pleasure for its own sake, in which the reproductive function is deliberately avoided, remains forbidden. Together, the discovery of the homosexual person and the discovery of reliable contraception have confronted the Church with a problem that it has never had to address before: the problem of sex for its own sake – sex as a generous and abundant giving of self and delight in the other without any reproductive function or justification beyond its own mutual joy. In a good creation, in which the human being is made in the image of God, how can we overcome our deeply-rooted shame about sex to acknowledge that this too is part of the diversity and abundance of creation, precisely because it is not captive to a strictly animal function of procreation? That is one of the most important questions facing the Church today.

But we also know that sex is not only about joy and delight. It is also about vulnerability and violence, about our capacity to wound and abuse as well as our capacity to heal and to love. That means that, in challenging the reductive and life-denying aspects of the Church's teaching on human sexuality, we also need to find a new language of sin in order to acknowledge the full complexity of what it means to be a sexual human being. We need to address another area of weakness in theologies based on an appeal to experience, and that is what Elizabeth Stuart describes as the tendency to advocate 'an identity based upon oppression and victimhood which, however hard it tries not to tends to

avoid issues of sin except as they apply to someone else.²⁰In seeking to challenge centuries of denigration of female sexuality and embodiment, feminists have risked going to the opposite extreme, so that we have failed to develop a language that would allow us to explore our sense of alienation and fallibility, and our capacity for abusive or misshapen desire, which are part of the human condition. There has been a tendency to project sin onto monolithic structures – patriarchy, heterosexism – in such a way that we do indeed come to represent ourselves as innocent victims of tyrannical systems. I am suggesting that sexual authenticity – being able to say ‘I am’ in a way which acknowledges our sexuality as intrinsic to what we are – also involves finding a language in which we go beyond the inauthenticity of both denigration and excessive affirmation, to develop a truthful language of sexuality that allows us to explore the dark aspects of desire as well as its positive and life-enhancing aspects. As Freud saw all too well, sexuality is rarely just about good clean fun – although sometimes it is. But it is also one of the most complex aspects of our humanity, and if the Church has exaggerated the risks and dangers of unbridled sexuality, there is much to suggest that modern culture has under-estimated those same risks.

So, with some caution, I am suggesting we need to reclaim the language of sin and fallenness to express our experience of vulnerability and fallibility, and to acknowledge that the capacity to hurt and betray lies coiled within our desire and it is often inseparable from it. If, as I suggested, Christian ministry is our peaceful participation in the ongoing work of creation, then we also know how fragile and fraught with failure that endeavour is. We are all capable of destruction as well as creation, and to develop fully as persons we need a language in which we can explore and express these realities about ourselves. We become part of the mendacity, part of those who collude in the lie, if we agree to deny this reality, for fear of selling arms to the enemy. For women, this means that we must not only resist the ancient stereotypes of virgin and whore, monster and mother, we must resist the more recent stereotypes of feminists and fembots, to coin Mary Daly’s phrase: modern, enlightened, know-it-all, have-it-all, do-it-all superwomen, and submissive, repressed wives and mothers who remain slaves of the patriarchal heterosexist regime that rules over us. For gays, perhaps it means resisting a culture in which the denigration and condemnation of homosexual relations is replaced by a kind of anything-goes culture of affirmation, a form of gay

²⁰ Stuart, ‘The View from the Font’, p. 12.

pride which refuses the Christian language of human fallibility and vulnerability before God.

But of course, this is the most risky of enterprises, for it makes us profoundly susceptible to those violent, anti-life forces that will pick on any admission of weakness as a sign of failure. Perhaps feminists and gays have neglected our fundamental ‘right’ to be wrong, the right to be forgiven and start again, which is the baptismal right of every Christian – not a right we claim from God for a gift is not ours to claim as a right, but a right we hold before others, precisely because it is God’s gift to each one of us. So let me suggest that perhaps we can bring together those contrasts Alison suggested in telling the Christian story, as both the forgiveness of sin and the creation of the world.

Let me conclude by drawing together some of these themes. To be a person made in the image of God is to be called to collaborative ministry with God and with one another in the ongoing work of creating the world. To be a person is to be able to say ‘I am’ before God and before one another, in such a way that nothing is hidden or denied or covered over. But to say ‘I am’ is also to acknowledge that I am becoming a person, in an ongoing process of becoming perfect. As Gregory of Nyssa saw, perfection is not a state of completion but a process of becoming. Like a little child learning to walk or ride a bike, the process of becoming a person, of attaining to our perfection in the image and likeness of God, is fraught with risk. We fall and sometimes we get hurt. Christ, the teacher and model, is there to pick us up and set us on our feet, to walk beside us and show us again and again how to get it right, how to truly become the selves we are called to be.

Ministry is the way in which we create a space for the other to be. It is that attentive, loving gaze through which we see the world as God’s world, and play our part in that world as God’s hands and feet and eyes and ears. It involves speaking truth to power, and refusing the mendacity that would make us collude in the undoing of self. It means saying ‘I am’, not in the spirit of defiant individualism that marks our age, but as persons made in the image of God.

And yes, it also means committees and flip charts and spider diagrams. But in all that bustle of collaboration, let us never forget to ask, ‘Who art thou?’

If many, how lonely,
Even in requited love how far
Each heart from other;

But if one the whole, and we
Leaves on that great tree,
And weary time a flow in starry veins,
Nourished from hidden roots, and blossoming boughs
Where birds of heaven rest,
Then no love lost.

(Kathleen Raine)

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AUTHORITY

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I A CRISIS IN AUTHORITY?

It is generally believed that there is a crisis of authority within the Catholic Church, and perhaps more widely within the churches. That crisis may be variously described depending on the perspective of the commentator. For some it is perceived as a failure in obedience. It is seen as a refusal to listen attentively and receptively to the Church's teaching articulated in Sacred Scripture or the pronouncements of the papal *magisterium* in its many forms. That failure is then commonly traced to what are viewed as deep-seated misconceptions about the Church caused by the prevailing *Zeitgeist* or spirit of the age. These commentators trace a devaluation or rejection of hierarchy first to our experience of representative and accountable democracy in the civic arena, and then to a related and widespread loss of deference to office-holders. They trace a distrust of moral absolutes and even of a distinctive, common Christian life, to the liberalism which has privatized moral freedom, created a more or less neutral civic framework in which different groups can pursue, to some extent, different moral visions, thus permitting many different groups to service a single economy.

For others the crisis is perceived as a failure essentially internal to the governmental and teaching offices of the Church. That's to say, those 'in authority', be they popes, bishops, or parish priests in the pulpit, have all failed to some degree as teachers. They have failed in what they teach, and in how they teach and govern, where that failure is judged by a compassionate truth and reason thought from this perspective to be equally accessible to all of us. Where the clergy are concerned, this failure is commonly traced to their formation as a separate caste or ruling class of celibate males in seminaries and then presbyteries isolated from the 'real world' according to norms developed between the 16th and the 19th centuries. Such clerics, it is thought, are singularly unskilled in dialogue and unwilling to listen to the experience of the wider Church and world. Here, too, commentators detect the operation of powerful

misconceptions about the life of the Church. They trace a devaluation or rejection of the roles to be played by women and by the laity first to a lingering patriarchy, where that is understood as a set of cultural values and norms which legitimate the unfair predominance of men in positions of power and influence. From this perspective, ideas which once deprived women of the vote, or excluded them from the workplace, still exclude them from decision-making within the Church. They further trace the position of the laity to a theology which underplays the priesthood exercised by all the baptized, because the theology of ordained ministry has been coloured by the monarchical government of Roman emperors and European kings. They also identify a worrying refusal to countenance the possible development of doctrine in the contemporary Church, new insight into moral problems, especially questions of sexual morality, and they trace this refusal to biblical or dogmatic fundamentalism, a false belief that the teachings of the Church never change and are easily read off the pages of the Bible.

These alternative descriptions have both, I think, something to recommend them. Neither perspective or commentary excludes the insights of the other; each catches something important about the situation confronting us. It is, however, also true that each perspective tends to be held by commentators or observers who regard with growing antagonism those who adopt the other viewpoint, characterising them and dismissing them as opponents to be defeated in a necessary battle for the life of the Church. The crisis in authority is thus aggravated by the formation of opposing parties, a drawing-up of battle-lines. Both sides angrily foment division, between those cast as 'unsound liberals' on the one hand and those caricatured as 'hide-bound conservatives' on the other. Each group denounces the other as betraying the Second Vatican Council. I am sad to say that out of an imperfect love for the Church, but also out of insecurity, these groups band together in demonising the other, to cast the other as a dangerous and wicked rival, desiring to cast out or extirpate the other in a cathartic but violent denouement.

Such a crisis is of course nothing new. We have a letter written from Rome by a certain Clement on behalf of the Christian community there to the church at Corinth in either the late first century or the early second century A.D. lamenting the appalling crisis of authority which had broken out in the church of that Greek city. It appears that one group of presbyters or elders had been deposed from office. Here, too, factions had riven the community. These crises are even to be expected if

we bear in mind St Augustine's grasp of the Fall. Augustine saw the Fall as releasing in us a disordered desire for power, so that we wilfully lord it over others, resent their proper authority and independence. The construction and exercise of authority is flawed by sin, needing Christ's grace. That grace is needed as much by each member of the Church as by the members of every other institution within which authority is an essential dimension of social life. Yet the Church, as the sacrament of Christ's healing ministry, as channel of Christ's grace, is meant to instantiate, intimate, communicate, a new pattern of redeemed authority.

To address the present crisis we could tackle each of the issues I mentioned earlier, but that would make for an inordinately long afternoon. What I wish to concentrate upon is the concept of a redeemed authority within the Church. But, to do that, we should first remind ourselves of what we mean by authority in the first place.

II WHAT IS AUTHORITY?

An authority is always relative both to an action and to a community; it is the legitimate power to act in a given way. By *legitimate* power I do not necessarily mean a power given by law. A woman's authority to discipline her young daughter is not, I think, given by the law of this country, though it is limited by law. It is given in our culture by her maternal relationship to her daughter, by the responsibilities inherent therein, though in some other culture it might not be granted by this relationship: it might belong instead to the eldest aunt to discipline the child. But authority, unlike power, is vested in us by some wider group who share a common project or life; it structures relationships within that group in terms of who may rightfully do what, so as to ensure the successful accomplishment of that project, the flourishing of that life. Sometimes a person authorises another to act in his or her name. We can in certain agreed circumstances delegate our legitimate powers to others, whose authority is given by this new relationship. Notice, please, that from this viewpoint authority is a necessary good, but is only occasionally about ordering someone else to do something. And an authority is not strictly speaking a person, but something entrusted to a person.

When we say as Catholics that God is the source of all authority, we do not mean that an arbitrary set of imperious commands has descended from heaven. Nor do we mean that God as Commander-in-Chief has appointed subalterns in their various ranks – kings, popes, and

the various ministers of the cloth or crown – to be obeyed regardless of what they in turn command; we mean first that God as author or creator of our specific human nature gifts us with a common life that will only flourish in certain intelligible ways. You might like to think about authority, therefore, as a ‘competence’, where that word refers both to a natural aptitude and a vested mandate. What we require different people to do, their roles and so their authority, must contribute to this flourishing. Whether something so contributes is open to rational investigation and experience.

For the God who is Truth and Goodness speaks to us authoritatively in the very movement of our minds and hearts when we grasp all that is true and good in what we experience, grasp it as truly good. That might be in the immediacy of experience; it might also be something we harvest afterwards in disciplined and sustained reflection upon experience – something essential for our growth in wisdom. God’s authority properly bites in the power of truth to claim our assent and of goodness to inspire our joy. The truth and goodness we recognize bear their own godly imperative: they vitally engage us as moral agents to choose intelligently. And when we act in this way, we enter freely with God into the fashioning of our own lives. Those of you who are familiar with the thought of St Thomas, will know his distinction between acts which human beings do, perhaps unreflectively or even involuntarily, and what Thomas regards as fully or properly human acts. It is in these latter acts that we engage with this authority of truth.

It is because God first speaks to us authoritatively in our apprehension of truth and goodness, that He can speak to us through the prophets and Scriptures, through His Word made flesh. And the God who is Truth does not create us according to one pattern and order us to live according to another pattern. Truth cannot contradict itself. If we find that a certain moral teaching of the Church does not contribute to our flourishing, but shows every sign of hampering our well-being, the authority of this teaching is properly questionable. Those who teach have a duty to re-examine the sources of that teaching. And those who face a situation in which the teaching seems at odds with the immediate demands of practical reasoning, must follow their consciences to do what they believe right and good at that time.

III AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH

Let's look more closely, then, at authority in the Church. Once again, this authority is to be related to the life or common project which gives the Church its vocation. St Augustine once described the Church as the world reconciled to God. Under this definition the Church has no distinct identity of its own, something true of the Kingdom. That's why in the book of *Revelation* the New Jerusalem which comes down from heaven conspicuously lacks a temple at its centre. So, we must look for what is distinctive about the Church in the present age, how that structures authority, but Augustine's definition isn't simply wrong or unhelpful. It reminds us of the provisional or temporary nature of all ecclesiastical authority. Just as there will be no married couples in heaven, though there will be men and women who were formerly husband and wife until death, so there will be no parish priests, no mother superiors, only people who once briefly exercised these offices before their entry into eternity. And that can help us keep such offices in perspective.

Our immediate project or vocation is one which the Church inherits from Israel. God says in *Exodus* 19:6, 'you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' We inherit that vocation in so far as it was first encapsulated, fleshed out, and accomplished, in the high priesthood of Jesus. He is the one who actively reconciles God and Man, who is the effective sign to the nations of God's infinite mercy. We participate in His mission, with His delegated authority: 'As the Father has sent me, even so I send you' (*John* 20:21). This commission is spoken to the 'twelve', but John's Gospel studiously avoids naming them apostles, so that the twelve are understood as pre-eminent disciples. We are all fitted for the exercise of this authority by our conformity to Christ in baptism, membership of His body. The resultant identity is spelled out by the author of *1 Peter*: 'you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' (*1 Pet.* 1: 3-5).

In virtue, then, of this foundational priesthood of all believers we are authorised, empowered by the Spirit, to proclaim the Good News, to sing God's praises, to give witness by all *we* say and do to what *God* has said and done in Christ. It is not some trickled-down authority, a heavily diluted version. Rather, all other Church authorities are at the service of this fundamental sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, a common life which is telling because holy. This might seem almost trivial, not the kind

of authority we're really interested in today, and I fear that we are often not sufficiently interested in this authority. But if you think back to the antagonism which afflicts observers of our present crisis, or reflect on the power of anger to drive people out of the Church, you will see how meditation on this first and universal authority must temper our approach to the crisis.

We should certainly not under-estimate the power of this priestly authority. It is our share in that authority of Christ to which Timothy Radcliffe refers near the start of *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* 'Jesus spoke with authority, not like the scribes and the Pharisees, and his authority was surely his manifest freedom and joy. His words made an impression because they were embedded in a life that was striking, reaching out to strangers, feasting with prostitutes, afraid of nobody.' (3-4).

To say that our vocation is to form a holy nation, a royal priesthood, and that all authority is designed to further this vocation is not to say that we each end up with identical roles and authorities. Indeed St Paul insists that different people have different roles. They have different ways of exercising their baptismal priesthood, in relation to the charisms they have received, those gifts of the Spirit widely divided out in the Church. St Paul describes these gifts in *Romans* 12:3-8 and *1 Corinthians* 12. In each account Paul is not talking only about distinct posts or offices in the church, but about realising the potential given by who we are, given by our relationships. This raises important questions about the extent to which gifts may go unrecognized as authorities, how talents may be squandered where people are not encouraged to make good use of them, and about which authorities need to be instantiated, delimited in church offices. The authority to teach the Faith may be given by a charism, such that anyone with a knowledge of faith has a duty and hence authority to communicate that knowledge in ways that will bear fruit, but it may be appropriate for some to be appointed officially as catechists or theologians on the basis of their knowledge and for the Church to restrict to such individuals certain teaching tasks within the parish, school, or seminary. Notice, though, that the Pauline vision is of multiple and co-operative authorities in which leadership, including Paul's own direction of the Corinthian church, must facilitate the symphonic integration of diverse gifts.

Much in the New Testament indicates that the twelve apostles were distinguished amongst the other disciples by the authority which Jesus granted them to act in His name. They are marked out as future judges of

Israel, dispensers of God's justice (*Matthew* 19:28). Jesus entrusts to them pre-eminently his mission of healing, exorcism, preaching, and the forgiveness of sins. At the close of Matthew's gospel it is the surviving eleven who are charged to 'make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you;' (*Matthew* 28:19-20). The Gospels further intimate a particular role given by Jesus to Simon Peter, symbolised in his new name as the Rock on which the Church is to be built, with the promise of the keys to the kingdom (*Matthew* 16: 18-19), and understood as a form of pastoral leadership in the Lord's commission to 'feed my lambs' (*John* 21:17). It is to these that full 'apostolic' authority or leadership in the Christian mission therefore belongs. We even see something of this authority exercised in Acts and in the Pauline letters, when the seven whom we now think of as deacons are created at the apostles' instigation, chosen by the body of disciples and then ordained by the apostles to care for the widows (*Acts* 6: 1-6). It is the authority manifest when the apostles and elders in the Jerusalem community are consulted on the observances to be followed in the Gentile churches of the diaspora (*Acts* 16: 4); and it is the authority on which St Paul explicitly draws when this 'least of the apostles' and one 'untimely born' exhorts the churches in letter after letter after letter (*I Corinthians* 15: 8-9). Here, we may say, the apostles exercise an authority which represents Christ as head of the Church to its own members. Notice, once again, that this apostolic authority is only occasionally a matter of telling people what to do, and even where it is a matter of this, it is not something as simple or brutal as barking commands. The ideal is that instructions should find assent in the church which adopts them. Look, if you will, at *Acts* 6:1-7: the apostles explain the reasons for their decision in terms of the Church's mission and their role within it; the command meets with the good pleasure of the Jerusalem community; a new office bears fruit in the life of that community.

Notice, then, the way in which this apostolic authority is inventive of the deacon's office. For what we see over the next two millennia is a Church history of ceaseless and imaginative invention as the Church restructures its authorities to meet pressing needs. It seems that in many early Christian communities episcopacy (a Greek word for supervision or oversight) was originally shared amongst a presbyterate, a body of elders or bishops, where there was no distinction of offices between these two titles. *I Clement*, the letter which I mentioned much earlier this evening, presents these men as authorised by the apostles to watch over the church

in their care and to appoint successors to replace them ‘with the common approval of the whole church’ (*1 Clement* 42 and 44). But the letter attests to the difficulty of resolving disputes in the absence of a single diocesan bishop. It reveals the degree to which the Roman church saw itself as obliged in charity to intervene, but also the difficulty of such interventions in the absence of any clear mandate to impose a solution. The letter therefore allows us to glimpse why the Church came to grow new offices: first, the so-called monarchical episcopacy, where one bishop stands at the head of a local church assisted by priests and deacons; second, and much later, the papal office, the Pope as the privileged locus of Petrine authority with a universal jurisdiction. It was only after these developments that people looked back to Clement and saw him as an early bishop of Rome and Pope, when in fact Rome was probably one of the last Christian communities to be headed by such a figure in the course of the second century.

Very early in second century, it would seem, Christians recognized a great advantage in having at the centre of each local church one bishop who served as a symbol of unity, regulating the life of the Church with the assistance of subordinated presbyters and deacons, and presiding at the Church’s liturgies. What the apostles had done as a body in representing Christ as Head of the Church, the bishop now did within each community. This development was championed by the would-be martyr, St Ignatius of Antioch, in the letters which he addressed to the churches of Asia in around 113 AD, and which were then disseminated by Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, himself a martyr some decades later.

The letters show that the monarchical bishop was perceived by Ignatius as a practical bulwark against heresy, a way of defending our core belief in Christ’s humanity and divinity. But as well as being a practical measure, Ignatius presented his church order as a powerful symbol of how we are saved through union with God in Christ and His Church. Subordination to the bishop becomes the visible expression of unity. The Ephesians are said to be ‘mingled’ or ‘combined’ with their bishop Onesimus ‘as the church is with Jesus Christ and as Jesus Christ is with the Father’ (*Ephesians* 5.1). The subordination of laity to clergy, of presbyters to bishop is the form this unity takes for Ignatius because it mirrors Christ’s human obedience to God, that union of wills. So, we too are called to participate in this union of wills, to imitate Christ by our own obedience, by our doing God’s will. Our subordination to the

bishop becomes not just a symbol of Christ's obedience to the Father, but an instantiation of it.

This theological construction has profoundly influenced the Church, and has no doubt served it well. But as a concept of authority it is one-sided or partial. For the proper functioning of the Church this top-down concept of authority needs to be integrated with the two earlier concepts of authority which I have already outlined: first, our reasoning apprehension of truth and goodness as authoritative, binding us in conscience; and second, the authority given by our common baptismal priesthood and mission. The Catholic Church has long recognised this complex nature of authority in its theology; but in every age we struggle to integrate these concepts in practice.

Let me end with consideration – at long last – of the most important thing which Jesus revealed about his and our authority, when he wrapped a towel around his waist and washed the feet of the disciples (*John* 13: 5), when he said that "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves." (*Luke* 22: 25-27). Each and every exercise of authority in the Church must be characterised by this intention, by this humble disposition. This is not incompatible with Ignatius' understanding of the symbolic importance accorded to any figure of unity, whether a Dominican Prior Provincial, a local bishop or the universal Pontiff. But I hope to have shown this afternoon that respect for Christian authority is sadly shrunk, belittled, if authority is characterised as something held only by the few at the centre, and shrunk even further if respect is thought to subsist solely in acts of obedience, for authority is that legitimate exercise of powers variously distributed among the Body of Christ for the continuance of his saving mission.

LISTENING 2004

Review Article: Timothy Potts

Not Easy but Full of Meaning: Catholic Family Life in 2004. London, Redemptorist Publications on behalf of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2005.

To mark the tenth anniversary of the UN Year of the Family, the Bishops' Conference initiated group discussions throughout the parishes of England and Wales on the theme 'My Family, My Church' based on twelve questions, four each on 'listening to my family', 'families in today's world' and 'families in the Church'. The responses were collated to form the basis of a meeting of parish and other delegates in each diocese (with 4 exceptions) attended by the local bishop and also by Bishop Hine, the Chairman of the Marriage and Family Life committee of the Bishops' Conference. This booklet is a report of the main issues raised by those responses and meetings. Indeed, it is *just* that: there is little attempt at analysis, though each chapter concludes with a section entitled 'What can we learn from this?' Yet, even so, *The Tablet* commented that 'Certain responses certainly make hard reading for the hierarchy.'²¹

The aim of the exercise was stated by the Bishop of Wrexham: 'We are here today because the bishops want to listen. We are here in order that you may speak and the bishops may listen and learn. The teaching church must be a listening church if it is to teach properly.' This, if it is to be believed, is a most welcome change of heart. The qualification arises from *Quest's* experience of the Bishops' Conference from 1998 to the present. Repeated requests for a meeting with bishops having appropriate Conference responsibilities for pastoral care and legislation affecting lesbian and gay Catholics, were stalled. Only three bishops (not including the Bishop of Wrexham) have shown any interest in listening to *Quest's* point of view. The Conference itself has taken the position that pastoral issues are a matter for individual bishops, but only one bishop has taken any initiative, and then through an intermediary, while the request to

²¹ 23 July 2005, p.33.

discuss pending legislation has simply been ignored. A meeting took place earlier this year between two administrative officers of the Bishops' Conference and two representatives of *Quest*, but it was merely exploratory in nature and, so far, there has been no sequel.

A report on marriage and family life might seem irrelevant for lesbian and gay Catholics but, although our concerns are not central to it, they are present on the margins. In any case, what is a family? Although there is a tendency in the report to assume that a family is always a nuclear family – pa, ma and 2.4 kids – and an 'extended' family that plus grandparents, many of the respondents are aware that nowadays families come in many different shapes and sizes and are not limited to blood relatives or married partners; some delegates even 'singled out friendship and informal partnerships as serving many of the same purposes as family', while another asked 'Can we see the difference between what is essential to family life and what is just the way we used to do it?'

There is also tacit recognition that the Church itself is God's family, as, indeed, so many of its liturgical prayers describe it. Yet there remains 'a real need to build community' in Catholic parishes, and for them 'to support people without judgement'. The report identifies 'a cry for belonging, acceptance and appreciation', for 'understanding and encouragement from those in positions of authority within the church' and quotes respondents urging that 'We must support the divorced and separated... We must respond to people who are gay or lesbian. They should not feel marginalized'.

There is no *one* thing in common that makes all of these groups families, but they are related to one another in many different ways: 'we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail'. Families themselves are like family resemblances: 'build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way'.²²

In the first chapter of the report, 'Family Life and the Changing World' there is evidence that the diversity of families is recognized and insistence that their members should be welcomed – not merely tolerated – in the Church. This is remarkable when one considers that the response, ranging from 0.03% to over 6% by diocese, but only less than 1.5% in three dioceses, suggests that, for the most part, these are the views of committed, church-going Catholics, not of baptized Catholics as a whole. Lay Catholics, it would seem, are much more open to diversity

²² Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953), *Philosophical Investigations*, I.66-67.

in family life than Church officials: 'Overall we heard participants empathise with those in non-traditional families and express a high degree of pragmatism about changing family structures' (41). Their comments, however, concern cohabiting and second marriages rather than same-sex partners, and there is some indication that the same degree of tolerance is not extended to the latter:

Mr D discovered some years ago that his son was gay. He tried to talk to a fellow parishioner about his concern, but quickly realised from the extremely hostile, disparaging remarks made that this was not a good idea. The parish priest reacted in a similarly prejudiced way ... Mr D feels angry, frustrated and totally rejected by the church ... There seems nowhere to turn. In his mind there is little hope for the future (62).

The report describes this as being 'a result of prevailing attitudes towards homosexuality', but should have said 'prevailing *Catholic* attitudes to homosexuality'.

The main lesson drawn at the end of this chapter is that 'the modern world presents little or no problem and this needs to be acknowledged' (67). Generally, people are thankful for the amenities of modern life, especially for good communications, though they experience both stress due to the competing calls on their time and, at the same time, loneliness. This is puzzling, because those who are short of time are usually too busy to be lonely. The explanation, I guess, is that we are dealing with different groups of people: the younger people who are very fully occupied with their work and their children, and the elderly who often live alone, do not meet new people so easily, and are sometimes bored. Loneliness can also be aggravated in the elderly if they have relied too heavily in the past on blood relations and not cultivated a family of friends, and then the younger relations have moved some distance away and perhaps their spouses have died. Lesbian and gay people are less prone to this mistake.

The second chapter, 'Family Life and Living the Faith', begins with a distinction between two senses of 'Faith'. For some, this meant the beliefs, values and practices of the Catholic Church; for others, their relationship with God, usually, but not exclusively, in the context of faith in the first sense. There was plenty of evidence from the replies that people's relationship with God and their commitment to *gospel* teaching and values was important to them, but an especially significant finding

was that ‘the community aspect of parish life was more widely identified and valued as supportive of family life than either prayer or the sacraments’ (88). In one diocese, three times as many people singled out the former as those who mentioned the latter. For some respondents their parish functioned ‘as an extended or replacement family’ but, against this, there were also many who experienced their parish as unwelcoming in various ways. It would seem that there is a significant divergence between the sacrament-centred clerical view and the lay view of personal relationships (with God and with parishioners) as central here.

Handing on the faith to a new generation is evidently, today, a source of much anxiety and guilt. Many people noted that two generations have now been virtually lost to the Church, with many parents and grandparents feeling that it is somehow their fault; their sadness that their offspring no longer practise and often no longer even believe in Christianity is aggravated by guilt. With less than 20% of practising Catholics married to other practising Catholics, divergence of belief is now the rule rather than the exception even between partners, but although ‘by and large non-Catholic partners seemed to be supportive’ (115), how far have parishes adapted themselves to multi-faith families?

The report returns to them in the next chapter (170-171), with complaints that ‘Only the Catholic partner and children are regarded as really belonging; the other partner can feel rejected and isolated, or is sometimes treated as a visitor – welcome but not one of us... We want to feel we belong to the Catholic Church as a family’ and again ‘our daughters now have their spiritual life within the Church of England because they do not want divisions within their own married life’.

The ‘What can we learn from this?’ section that concludes this chapter is very disappointing. It singles out eight key elements of faith transmission within families, claiming that they are supported ‘by the findings of academics and practitioners researching the question from other faith perspectives’. Yet each of the eight points is supported, instead, by references to papal encyclicals, mostly John Paul II’s *Familiaris consortio*. So what purported to be an exercise in listening to lay Catholics has degenerated, once again, into *a priori* teaching from on high! An opportunity has been missed to bring together the voice of Catholic laity with empirical research in the area.

With chapter 3, ‘Our Beliefs and Pastoral Practices’, we reach the heart of the report. After noting a polarity of opinion between those who

sought a solution to present problems in 'a clear reaffirmation of traditional teaching' and those who thought 'a more sensitive approach to many of the moral issues' essential, the report features examples of the latter: 'We must support the divorced and separated... We must respond to people who are gay or lesbian. They should not feel marginalized' (134). After mentioning the problems of disabled people, it goes on to highlight inconsistencies in pastoral practice, especially with respect to communion for inter-Church families and a perceived disparity between the treatment of those who have remarried after divorce and cohabiting unmarried people. One respondent even spoke of a 'postcode lottery' in this context. This will be very familiar to lesbian and gay Catholics, although we are not mentioned at this point.

We come back into the picture, however, in a section on gender, sexuality and fertility. Rather puzzlingly, the report first says that gender issues did not figure highly in the responses and conversations, but then that the role of women is seen as 'especially unfair' (150) because their gifts were neither appreciated nor utilized: 'We should welcome women as full members of the church, e.g. ordination to diaconate and priesthood for women. We are missing women's gifts' (151). On sexuality, a respondent is quoted upbraiding Church officials for failure to re-think certain aspects of their attitude to sexuality: 'This has alienated so many who should be part of what would be a much livelier Catholic community if most of our children's and grandchildren's generations had remained a real part of it' (152).

Some of the diocesan conversations, according to the report, were attended by those cohabiting or in lesbian or gay relationships, but in many cases they did not disclose this. In fact the only diocese to ask explicitly for delegates from *Quest* was Lancaster, and two members, one a Catholic and the other an Anglican, in their fortieth year of partnership, attended the conversation day. One of the groups discussed 'alternative lifestyles' and unanimously recommended to the plenary session, where it was approved to great applause, that the Church should 'give support to those in same- and different-sex partnerships by offering a service of blessing'. This was subsequently incorporated in the report of the conversations in the diocesan newspaper, *The Voice*, though with 'support' amplified to 'support and recognition'. Unfortunately this recommendation is not mentioned in the *Listening 2004* report, which concentrates instead on the negative side of present practice: 'The continual message from the church is that homosexuality is so, so dreadful. Our gay son just hasn't stood a chance. The church has always

decried any type of lifestyle for gay and lesbian young people'. 'My brother is gay, the church has been very intolerant of him' (156).

On clerical child abuse, the report registers 'awareness that massive misjudgements had been made by those in authority at the time, and approval of measures ... since' (157) and quotes a call for 'honesty not secrecy', while others considered celibacy for priests as being 'unrealistic and unnecessary'. The report, however, does not pursue this issue in any depth; the treatment is both brief and superficial. Considering the impact of this issue on the trust of families for priests, it warranted much more emphasis.

The last of the sexual issues broached is contraception. Some described it as 'no longer an issue' for the younger generation. This is completely ambiguous: does it mean that the teaching of Church officials on the topic is no longer controversial, or – more probably – that nobody takes any notice of it any longer? The latter interpretation is supported by the following paragraph, which tells us of a young woman who came to her diocesan conversation mandated to urge 'how difficult and unreasonable the ban on artificial contraception was', and then of a parish council conversation where the topic was not raised until the priest suggested that it might 'no longer be an issue'. Then 'The lid came off. A great deal of anger and resentment began to be expressed,' which is detailed in a long paragraph that follows (161).

A short section is devoted to single people (understood very broadly to include those who live alone as well as those not in a partnership, and apparently also to childless couples); the responses and conversations revealed 'a prevailing sense of exclusion from the church community'. Considering that about one in three homes are single-person households in this country today, this shows up the weakness of focussing on families, especially when it emerges that only a household consisting of parents *plus children* counts as a family (otherwise why include childless couples under single people?) On this reckoning of family, families account for a minority of households and the implication of the exercise must be that Church officials are not interested in listening to the rest of us. This chimes, too, with the experience of *Quest* in its dealings with officialdom.

A section on divorce and the Eucharist expands earlier insistence that divorced and separated people need support, whereas the practice 'was most often interpreted as representing a lack of forgiveness and mercy on the part of Christ's church' (178). This complaint has been festering since the National Pastoral Congress in 1980, which asked the

bishops to 'look at ways of showing compassion to those whose marriages have broken down irreconcilably, whose second marriage is a living witness to Christ and who seek to re-establish unity with the Church through the eucharist'.²³ The difficulties created by present practice for parents trying to bring up their children as Catholics are highlighted, as is 'the perceived disparity between the treatment of priests who had sexually abused children and lay people who had divorced and remarried' (180).

The 'What can we learn from this?' section that concludes this chapter enunciates the central message of the entire listening exercise: '*Over and above any other single finding ... was our realisation of the massive significance to families of welcoming, loving, accepting relationships, both at home and in the church*' (186); 'love, justice, mercy and forgiveness should prevail over rules, regulations and their often painful consequences' (184); 'the church community as an extended family of acceptance, celebration and support is absolutely indispensable' (186). At present, by contrast, too many people feel marginalized, whereas the Church should 'celebrate marriage and family life, support the divorced, separated, same sex etc. with love and care'. We need *small communities* where people can feel welcomed and supported (188).

A final chapter considers the Priorities for Church and Family Action. It begins by advocating a 'bottom up' as against a 'top down' approach, stressing that solutions must come from the grass roots and will be tailored to *local* conditions. The authors of the report, however, do not seem to have grasped the revolutionary implications of this requirement. It goes contrary to long ingrained Church practice. The Roman Curia is dedicated to a policy of control from the top and a 'one size fits all' strategy; its practice is mirrored in dioceses and parishes, and enshrined in canon law. Pius XI may have formulated the principle of devolution (subsidiarity), but it has notoriously not been applied *within* the Church. Is it realistic to suppose that Church officials will be capable of such an about-turn?

The report sees three areas as being of 'overarching importance' to the Church. These are central to the exercise because they structure the three-year follow-up determined by the bishops and now implemented with appointments, web-sites and resources. (The principal web-site is www.celebratingfamily.org.uk, with links to the others.) It is worth

²³ (1981) *Liverpool 1980: Official Report of the National Pastoral Congress*. Slough, St Paul Publications, p. 173.

emphasizing, at this point, that the success of the Listening 2004 project depends as much, if not more, upon what happens in *these* three years (2006-8) than on all that went before. The report, indeed, itself ends by quoting a warning: 'If nothing comes back from all this, then it will harm the Church'. Why? Because an exercise like this raises expectations; if they are not fulfilled, then the resulting disillusionment produces an end state worse than the situation before the exercise was begun. There have already been too many initiatives that have fizzled out in this way, beginning with the National Pastoral Council in 1980 and repeated on a smaller scale in many dioceses since.

Church officials should take to heart the observation of a respondent from the Diocese of Portsmouth:

The Church needs more humility and the realisation that it is run mainly by those who have only experienced family life as children not parents. The Church in this country will shrink to almost nothing if it doesn't think about ways of accepting rather than excluding our new family set-ups (134).

To this, one may add, 'and it will deserve to shrink to nothing'. Yet it seems that far too many Church officials are still complacent about the prospects for the Church in Europe and more intent on griping about the modern world (with which, we noted earlier, the respondents to *Listening 2004* are, by and large, pretty satisfied) than on taking a hard look at themselves.

The first priority for action identified by the Report is to create welcoming local parish communities 'as the foundation of care and support for all' (192). This has been designated as the focus for 2006. The report spoke frequently of 'parish communities', but at this point we should note that there are few more abused terms than 'community': e.g. 'gay community', 'Muslim community' and even 'international community'. Gay people have their sexual orientation in common (though even that is subject to significant variations, and especially if we talk of an LGB community); Muslims share a common faith (though again with significant differences); what the nations of the world, which are characterised by their disunity rather than their unity, have in common, is anybody's guess.

If 'community' is to mean anything at all, there must be more to a community than appears in these examples. Similarly, it will not be enough to merit calling a parish a community that its members worship in the same building and share – roughly – the same beliefs. One

criterion that seems reasonable is that most of the members of a community should know or at least be personally acquainted with each other. That immediately limits communities to fairly small groups; sociologists tell us that about 150 people is the upper limit. Beyond this (an aspiration continually attested throughout the report), members of a community seek mutual support. Clearly common beliefs and practices facilitate this.

Most Catholic parishes in the UK are far too big ever to be communities. Perhaps the occasional country parish might qualify, but Catholicism in Britain is primarily urban and regular parish attendance around 1,000. As a writer in *The Tablet's* 'Parish Practice' column put it:

what worked to serve a small, homogeneous community four centuries ago no longer fulfils the community needs of the one thousand or more Catholics within its perimeter today who scarcely know one another... The time has come to stop spending immense amounts of energy and resources shoring up a crumbling model.²⁴

The report, to give it its due, does say 'a warm, concerned, sensitive parish or small group community', but it does not recognize that such small groups, rather than the parish, will have to be the basic units of the Church in future. Instead, it pins its faith on the 'crumbling model' of the parish. This loads the dice against success from the start.

In September, 1993, the Bishops of England & Wales went to a hotel in the Lake District for several days to reflect on the role of the Church in today's culture. Afterwards, they published a short paper in which they 'resolved that the development of all the gifts given by God to his people was one of their first priorities. They wish to see an openness to re-shaping the image and model of parish life, especially by fuller development of small groups and communities. "We are convinced that the manner and style of relationships in the Church are part of the sign it gives, and for this reason we must develop patterns of collaborative ministry as a key feature of Church life to come. We wish to encourage all those, women and men, who have been trying to implement and explore such new relationships, with all their difficulties and promises".²⁵ This embodies an explicit acknowledgment that small groups have a central role to play in the Church; yet, thirteen years later, nothing has been done to

²⁴ Adrian B. Smith, M.Afr., *The Tablet*, 7 October 2006, p.17. This was the seed of the CBCEW report *The Sign We Give* mentioned by Dr Kelly on p. 6.

²⁵ *The Tablet*, 2 October 1993, p. 1278.

implement that insight, nor has there been any reshaping of the image and model of parish life. Have we any reason to suppose that this new initiative will be any different?

The report notes that belonging to a genuine community was 'identified over and over again as the first step in any programme of support' (193). Within such 'welcoming and accepting' groups, people could share stories of family life and talk openly. The role of the priest was envisaged especially as 'having time for people', and hence not being submerged in administrative duties but delegating them to parishioners. But he would need to be 'one that knows the reality of contemporary family life and adjusts to accommodate it as far as possible' (including 'adjusting church timetables' and 'a continued commitment to good listening' (196-7))

We are now almost at the end of the year dedicated to achieving this goal. How far has it been implemented? The website offers three documents: first, 'Everybody's Welcome? Helping your church to become more friendly for all kinds of families'. This is a workbook for parish groups, containing much practical advice and, most important of all, a questionnaire for gathering information about the present state of a parish and the aspirations of its parishioners. The second document is called 'The Ministry of Welcome: A training resource for parishes' and largely overlaps the first in its content. The third is 'Keeping in Touch: A parish ministry reaching out to non church-going and church-going Catholics' and is more ambitious than the other two in that it aims to reach people who do not come to the parish church of their own accord. There has been no attempt to integrate these three documents or to advise potential users as to which might be most suited to their needs. Indeed, the first two documents have been adapted from other sources, including Anglican ones. It is as though the bishops have no ideas of their own on how to implement their first goal, so have cobbled together ready-made suggestions from elsewhere.

The website lists six further leaflets which, between them, cover most of the more contentious (though urgent) topics raised at the conversations and that are not, for the most part, covered in the three documents listed above. In no case is a leaflet yet available. Clicking on 'Living with divorce and remarriage', 'Lacking a shared faith in God' or 'Those who share Christian faith within two Christian traditions' elicits the response 'A leaflet to help parishes is currently in the final stages of development', while 'Families with gay and lesbian members', 'Families

with lapsed and disenchanted Catholics' and 'Families with young people' are mere headings that cannot be 'clicked'.

This is pathetic over a year after the report appeared. My guess is that it is not the fault of those appointed to implement the follow-up but of the bishops for not agreeing what the leaflets should say; the procedures of the bishops' conference are cumbersome at the best of times – it only meets twice a year, and too many matters have to be settled, between meetings, by the Standing Committee. At any rate, the momentum generated by the conversations has now been lost and it will require gargantuan efforts to regain it, even given a real spirit of urgency of which there are presently no signs. So far, I can see no changes in the Leeds parishes that are my home territory or any attempt to make them more welcoming. Given the authoritarian structure of parish government, it will take the active enthusiasm and energy of parish priests to kick-start improvements, but I would wager that few have even read the report. Meanwhile, a stranger can typically attend any of these parish churches for years without anyone speaking to him (or her).

The second area identified by the report as of central importance is marital and family spirituality. This was *not*, however, at the top of the agenda of the participants in the conversations; the authors of the report admit, indeed, that 'very little was said about marital or family spirituality' (198), so this is part of *their* agenda. To launch this second phase of the follow-up, under the title 'Home is a holy Place', an international symposium was held at Ushaw College from 20.-22. October, but apparently did not warrant a report in the issue of *The Tablet* for 28. October. It also served to celebrate the 25th anniversary of *Familiaris consortio*. The aims of the 2007 phase of the follow-up are stated in very general terms on the website and there is no indication of what practical measures are envisaged; perhaps the bishops are looking to the Ushaw conference to produce some ideas.

The third and final area of importance, earmarked for 2008, is equipping parents for passing on faith. Here, too, the recommendations have little connexion with material from the conversations: a reference back to the eight points culled from Papal encyclicals in chapter 2, bolstered by 'making relationship skills training for marriage and parenting much more widely available' (whatever that may mean) and further investigation of family-centred catechesis. The website is still just a skeleton, though it contains a bibliography and a link to the site for the international theological pastoral congress on the topic held last July.

The ‘What can we learn from this?’ section which concludes each of the other chapters is replaced, here, by one entitled ‘Where do we go from here?’ Not far, it seems. A few generalities that will neither inspire nor challenge anyone are followed by an exhortation to ‘keep listening to those families experiencing hurt or disillusionment with the Church’ (213). An opportunity has been missed to draw together the more striking conclusions that emerged in the course of the report in a series of concrete recommendations to the bishops, in the manner of a report from a government committee.

The sympathies of the authors of this report with those Catholics who want to see major changes in the attitudes of Church officials are evident. It consistently plays down the views of so-called ‘traditional’ Catholics who seek a more strident re-affirmation of Tridentine Catholicism, and I suspect that it seriously under-estimates the strength of this party, especially but not exclusively among the elderly. On the other hand, the authors also lack the courage of their convictions and constantly fall back upon presenting more clearly the current official teaching as a solution where the participants in the conversations are clearly asking for changes in that teaching.

The unacknowledged stumbling-block to all initiatives of this kind is the Roman Curia. It is unyielding on all of the contentious pastoral issues that make our churches seem unwelcoming to anyone who does not conform to its rules. We are members of a Church that is dominated by canon law and canon lawyers, whose first thought is always for upholding the regulations, and for saving face for its officials. These are the values of the Pharisees (the ‘good, religious people’ of their time, let us remember), not of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Roman Curia appoints our bishops, is their boss, and can sack them. So they are trapped between pastoral needs, on the one hand, and unbending Church officials, on the other. It might be better, in the long run, to acknowledge openly that so long as the Roman Curia sees control as its mission, any attempt to listen to the people of God is going to be counter-productive, rather than to pretend to an uncritical loyalty to policies that they can see to be pastorally disastrous. If they cannot help the divorced and remarried, what hope is there for acceptance of lesbian and gay Catholics? We live in a top-heavy Church, and reform is now badly needed at the summit: *ecclesia semper reformanda*, as the saying has it, and never more so than at the present.
