

Is the Church Open to Change in its Governance? Some Historical Evidence

Synopsis

Father Michael Sheeran, S.J., President of Regis University (CO), highlights changes related to the selection of bishops and the election of popes that have occurred throughout the Church's history. He also discusses the contemporary American experience of a laity increasingly well-educated and competent in professional expertise but often not well-educated "in the Faith." He calls for a "new evangelization" and for greater access to significant decision-making.

About the Author

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Is the Church open to change in its governance?

A useful way to see whether the Catholic Church can be flexible is to look at history. The results may be surprising to many, especially Catholics who presume that current procedures have been constant through the centuries. During its almost 2000 years, the Church has been rather nimble in adjusting its mechanisms for selecting popes and bishops, and changing the scope of authority of papal and diocesan offices in response to changing secular realities. Current concerns among American laity about increasing their voice in assuring proper supervision of priests and making all sorts of other policy decisions should not particularly threaten anyone familiar with the Church's history.

Take, for example, the election of popes – to many a prime example of the unchangeable procedures and ancient traditions of Roman Catholicism.

Most recently, John Paul II rewrote the rules for electing Popes. Instead of the traditional 2/3 plus 1 super majority of the voting Cardinals, he decided that, after a limited number of days of voting, only a simple

majority would be needed. He prevented drawn out election conclaves by removing the pressure to settle on a centrist candidate for whom an overwhelming majority could vote. The Church has changed indeed.

The very election of the Pope by a College of Cardinals was a practical device introduced only in the twelfth century to provide a simple system for selecting Popes. Catholics believe that Jesus instituted the Papacy as a center of unity. But no one claims Jesus established unchangeable election rules.

And further change is quite possible. The present Pope has often urged that all offices in the Church that do not require ordination should be open to women. Since, over the centuries, there have been Cardinals who were unordained laymen, we shouldn't be shocked if the next set of Papal election laws allows for women electors.

Another area of surprising flexibility is the selection of bishops. We are used to the direct appointment of bishops by Rome without significant input by the laity or the clergy. But we should also be aware that, for centuries, Catholic bishops were elected by the priests assigned to the local cathedral. This vote was then proposed for papal confirmation, which was refused only for grave reasons. In a variant of that approach, the first American bishop, John Carroll, was elected by a vote of all the priests resident in the thirteen colonies.

In the high Middle Ages, popes and emperors struggled over whether either was validly enthroned without the other's assent. And the final approval of bishops within each country was similarly at issue. Out of these struggles emerged the concordats (treaties) between the Vatican and individual European countries. In many concordats written in the last centuries, the government might nominate three candidates for bishop and the Vatican was required to select one. Or the reverse might be the case as well.

Secular politics influenced even the election of popes. As late as 1903, the Austro-Hungarian Emperor – through one of the cardinals who served as his spokesman inside the election conclave itself -- vetoed the leading candidate for pope (Cardinal Rampolla), thus occasioning the election of Pius X.

When John Carroll was elected the first American bishop, the Vatican even sent the results to the new American government, in case it had any objections. Thomas Jefferson, the American representative in Paris, declined on behalf of the government to either approve or disapprove, and the Church achieved – for the first time since Constantine in the fourth century -- independence from secular government influence over this central part of internal Church appointments.

Lay participation in Catholic decision-making bodies is not unheard of either. As early as the 1830's, Bishop John England of Charleston, S.C. experimented with a bicameral diocesan legislature modeled somewhat on the secular government and somewhat on the practice of the Episcopal Church.

A word of caution: It would be prudent if Catholics would follow Bishop England's lead and study carefully the governance structures of the Protestant communities. Such study would yield some useful ideas about what works; it might also prevent Catholics from repeating other communities' mistakes. It would be sad, for example, if the determination of whether someone was a heretic could be decided by majority vote of a group with no formal training in theology!

In short: The Catholic Church has been able to operate with all sorts of systems for selecting her bishops and popes. Church governance has flexibly adjusted to new situations. Those who think that Church governance must be inflexible in order to be true to its religious mission are simply mistaken.

Groups like Voice of the Faithful, however, represent something really new. Their members are not government officials or even the traditional power blocs of society: the upper class – America's equivalent of the nobility – or the politicians or the wealthy. Instead, its members present a truly novel situation: a large and highly educated group of laity, which did not exist for the first 1900 years of the Church's life.

When I was a child, my father would sometimes talk about his own childhood in New York City early in the Twentieth Century. It was considered inappropriate, he said, for the pastor to endorse from the altar candidates for city offices. So the pastor would hold a Sunday afternoon reception in the church hall.

Candidates acceptable to the pastor would be present and stand next to the pastor so they could shake hands with the long line of voters.

My father used to say, “It had to be that way. The pastor had an education, while many of the parishioners couldn’t read. People depended on him for guidance in everything from voting to handling their money to raising their children.”

Today, things have changed. In many a parish, the majority of the congregation are as well educated as their priest, often even better educated. They have the self-confidence to make up their own minds about politics and finances and child rearing. And they believe they have something more to contribute to their parish and their diocese than a passive acquiescence.

When Vatican Council II ushered in “the age of the laity,” there was recognition of this growing competence among parishioners. An array of new organizations for lay participants like parish councils and diocesan pastoral councils was introduced, and lay people were added to decision-making bodies at the diocesan level. In most cases, these new entities were merely advisory, giving counsel to the pastor or the bishop.

Occasionally, however, the groups had real power. The lay-dominated Finance Council of the Archdiocese of Boston, for example, rejected Cardinal Law’s initial acceptance of a \$30 million settlement with the victims of former priest John Geoghan. Under the Code of Canon Law promulgated by Pope John Paul II in 1983, the Cardinal must obtain approval – not just advice -- from the Finance Council for such an “act of extraordinary administration.”

So, on the one hand, an array of changes including lay people in Church decision-making is not a problem. However, the extent to which such inclusion will actually happen is highly uncertain.

The Church’s difficulty and its opportunity is that the laity is educated, but not necessarily in the Faith.

Ironically, with the loss after Vatican II of nuns from grade school and high school education, basic instruction in the fundamentals of Catholic belief declined markedly. I am still amazed each fall by how many Regis freshmen who are Catholics know nothing about what a sacrament is, or about the basic categories used by the Church to analyze moral questions, or even that the letters INRI at the top of a crucifix abbreviate four Latin words which mean, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.”

In recent years, Regis has offered more courses in the basics of Catholicism. Our campus ministers find many Catholic students need similar introduction to Catholic worship.

This is nothing new. In many cases, the parents of these students are equally uninformed.

From the clergyman’s point of view, the educated laity has a lopsided education and doesn’t realize it. But education brings self-confidence. So people who are educated in business or engineering tend to think they are competent in religious questions even though they have not been seriously educated in theology. As anyone who has visited an avant garde art show has experienced, there is a terrible temptation to dismiss what we do not understand.

Making things even more difficult, Americans tend to place immense store on democratic process, dismissing other forms of government out of hand. The Church’s government tradition, of course, is monarchical, with bishop and pope typically making decisions after consultation. For a people who take for granted that majority vote is the best way to make decisions, it is hard to understand the advantages for consistent doctrine and practice that come from the Church’s sort of limited monarchy where decisions emerge after the receipt of extensive advice.

For bishops who know American ecclesiastical history, lay power is a threat: In the first decades of the United States, lay trustees owned each parish church and often used their ownership to refuse to accept the bishop’s appointee as pastor because the priest was not of the parishioners’ nationality.

More recently, many a pastor can recount how post-Vatican II parish councils produced mostly bickering and deadlock.

So there is a temptation for bishops and clergy to think that laity bring nothing worthwhile to Church decision-making and deserve no place at the table.

However, when clerical sex abuse comes to the fore, bishops and clergy suddenly realize that lay people have a right to be certain that their children are not abused and a right to monitor whether their contributions are spent on the charitable purposes for which they were given. The laity very much have a place at the table and offer a balance to the tendency of clerics – like any party in power in any organization – to be alert primarily to the interests of their own group.

And clergy recall that those failures of parish councils probably trace more to lack of know-how and leadership by clergy when this “novel” form of participation was introduced.

At such a juncture, even pessimistic priests recall that the Church is really all its members, not just its officials. Membership comes through baptism. And lay Catholics are just as much at the heart of the Church as any priest like me is. The laity, just as much as the clergy, are the Church’s witness to the world that meaning comes through serving God in others, not through living for self.

So, far from despairing about the limits of today’s laity, it is my experience that these educated Catholics – precisely because of their education and the self-confidence which education creates -- are interested in listening if they are approached with respectful invitations and not with orders to conform. It is striking, for example, how many Catholics preparing for marriage are receptive to strict Catholic teachings once they learn for the first time the tradition of thought that lies behind these teachings. But such receptivity doesn’t happen if they are first approached with authority rather than invitation. The Church is paying the price for

too many sermons and counseling sessions where the easy appeal to authority replaced explanation and invitation. That worked in my father's immigrant parish, but not now.

This is a time when the bishops and priests of the American Catholic Church face a major choice: Will Church leaders learn to adapt to an educated laity whose intellectual short suit is knowledge of religion? Or will priests and bishops continue to treat today's laity as the semi-literate congregations of the Church's first nineteen centuries?

If the Church as a whole chooses the former path, there will need to be a major retooling of the approach of sermons and counseling and written materials and the interpretation of regulations. What is needed is a change of attitude, not of doctrine. We need to launch a "new evangelization" of our own educated members to educate them even better in the Faith. And bishops need to work simultaneously to open access to all sorts of decision-making bodies.

In this vein, we can expect American bishops to experiment with giving laity a serious voice in the normal process of assigning priests to parish and other duties. There will be diocesan committees to audit all disciplinary actions – not just sexual abuse -- involving clergy and other employees of dioceses and parishes. The voice of the laity can readily grow through membership on diocesan school boards. Lay influence on diocesan financial priorities -- already on the rise – will expand. Even broad consultation of priests and laity about selection of bishops would not be new but merely a return to past custom. And lay participation – through decision-making synods or congresses – might play a major role in determining what policy issues in the secular world should get special Church attention. Should right to life issues get more Catholic attention, for example, than civil rights and social justice during election season?

On the other hand, Church leaders can give in to temptation and take the path they legitimately walked for the first 1900 years of an uneducated faithful. In today's context that means they will expect the laity to conform or quietly drop out (as many have been doing for decades). If the Church's leadership chooses this path, Catholicism will have no meaningful answer to groups like Voice of the Faithful. Instead, the

Church will have unnecessarily abandoned its own and demonstrated that, at least at the moment, it does not know how to cope with an educated laity.