

PARTICIPATION OF THE LAITY IN THE DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURES OF THE LOCAL CHURCH: SOME REFLECTIONS

In the last 50 years efforts have been taken in the Church at various levels-local, regional, and national- to giving concrete shape to the teachings of Vatican II and the norms of the codes of canon law on the full and active participation of all the faithful in the pastoral life and mission of the Church, in particular, on the participation of the laity in the decision-making structures. Establishing the participative structures has not been an easy task because, as Bradford Hinze rightly observes, it “demands the development of new patterns of behavior, new habits of thought and action, new attitudes, all of which are aspects of cultivating virtues. When structures have been recommended but not mandated, they are frequently not implemented. And when mandated, they do not always live up to the intention of the council fathers or the architects of the codes. At times it has been a matter of putting new wine into old wineskins and of half-hearted conversion”.¹

Immediately after the promulgation of the Latin code the CBCI Commission for the Laity circulated in 1984 a guidebook on pastoral councils and strongly recommended the establishment of these bodies in every diocese/eparchy.² After a lapse of thirty years the CBCI declared in 2014 that the bishops should ensure the rightful place of our lay faithful in our Church in India. Recognizing the God-given talents and potentialities of the lay faithful, the bishops should in the first place, listen more to their

¹ See B. Hinze, “The Reception of Vatican II in Participatory Structures of the Church: Facts and Friction”, in *Canon Law Society of America Proceedings*, 70(2008)28-52 (= “The Reception of Vatican II in Participatory Structures of the Church”), at p. 28.

² See CBCI Commission for the Laity, *Pastoral Councils in Dioceses and Parishes*, New Delhi, 1984.

voice. Therefore, they should commit themselves to establish pastoral councils in every diocese³. Does this not point out that all the bishops could not be said to be advocates and models of participatory governance? Even those advisory bodies that are established, how do they function? Two concrete examples are given to illustrate the present situation (Our intention is not to malign anybody's name).

Example one: A particular parish consists of two big villages situated in a distance of 12 km from one another. There are about 500 Catholic families with a membership of about 2000 faithful. Both the villages have their own village committees comprising only of men who manage the affairs of the villages which mainly consist in celebrating the annual feast of the patron saint of their churches, arranging funerals, conducting social ceremonies and rituals on the occasions of marriages, ear-boring, new house warming, etc. There is neither pastoral council nor finance council in this parish since the villages do not agree upon or wish to have another forum independent of their village committees. Now and then the pastor consults the respective village committee for any exigency. However, in order to satisfy the Bishop's demand that all the parishes should have a pastoral and finance council and that otherwise he will not sanction the little sum fixed for pastoral activities, the pastor constituted the pastoral and finance councils in accordance to the norms of the diocese comprising ex officio, nominated and elected members and got them approved by the Bishop. At the behest of the secretary to the diocesan pastoral commission for the laity, who is in-charge of parish councils, this list is routinely updated with some changes at the expiry of the term of three years and approved by the Bishop! Thank God, the pastor has not maintained any "cooked" minutes book, nor the

³ See CBCI, *Report of the 31st CBCI General Body Meeting, Palai, February 5-12, 2014*, CBCI Centre, New Delhi.

Bishop cared to check it during his pastoral visit, although it is included in the check-list for the pastoral visit!!

Example two: In a particular diocese the agenda for the Diocesan Pastoral Council meeting is the same for the last ten years also. In the letter sent to the members it states, “In this meeting we are going to get suggestions for the pastoral ministry and to prepare action-plan”. The lay man secretary to the council, who is serving in that capacity for several terms, changes every time only the date in the format of the letter and dispatches it to the members. It does not mention any specific agenda that are relevant to the life of the diocese, nor are the members supplied with any background material prior to the meeting enabling them to prepare and contribute quality counsel in the meeting. Similarly, for the meeting of the Diocesan Finance Council, where a couple of lay people are also members, the given agenda will be very unspecific and generic, as for example, “Purchase of Property”. Till the meeting the members will not know any other details such as: from whom the property is purchased, at what cost, for what purpose, etc. In such scenario, consultation is often contrived as ratification of decisions already taken. The consultants often cynically remark that it is not a “consult” but an “insult”.

Hope these examples are an exception rather than a rule. But what do we gather from such episodes? They manifest that serious problems and uncertainties of both a theoretical and practical nature exist and raise several questions such as: Are not the laity taken for a ride? Are not ecclesial consultative bodies degenerated into mere tokenism and formalism? Are not the pastors accountable for the abuse or disuse of the dynamics of consultation and decision-making? Raising these questions for serious reflection, I would like to highlight the following observations.

Is the Pauline Ecclesiology Applied to Consultation?

The vision of the Church as a hierarchically structured communion of fundamentally equal persons with complementary roles, working together to build up and sustain the whole, is memorably expressed in St. Paul's metaphor of the *Mystical Body of Christ*. In his first letter to the Corinthians — a community that was, it seems, torn by conflicts that threatened to reduce it to competing factions — he begins by emphasizing the unity and equality of all. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (1 Cor 12: 4-7).

In writing of the roles of members of the Christian community, St. Paul's emphasis is upon what they do within the Church in order to build it up and be of service to one another. They are healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in tongues, and so on. Within a fairly short time, however, the realization grew that, by reason of their membership itself, the Christian community's lay members also were called to accept their share in doing the work of the Church precisely by what they did outside the confines of the ecclesial community. That is to say, they were called to be evangelizers — by their very manner of life, to give witness to the world regarding their faith (1 Cor 12: 27-30).

The Pauline ecclesiology of the variety of charismatic gifts of the members of the Christian Community, particularly the laity, is generally attributed to different services and offices in the Church. However, the inherent relationship between the charismatic gift of giving counsel and the participatory structures does not seem to have received sufficient attention.

Therefore, the process of consultation and decision-making seems to have been limited to carry out certain canonical actions rather than the expression of *being the Church*.

Caveat on “Democratizing” the Church

Church is defined as a *sui iuris* society. It is often reaffirmed in the official teachings that the Church promotes democratic values, but in its inner circles of governance it is not a democracy. This is also reflected in the participatory structures of governance in dioceses and parishes. Pope John Paul II acknowledged the need for parochial and diocesan pastoral councils in scattered and undeveloped statements in his post-synodal apostolic exhortations *Christifidelis Laici* in 1988 (nos. 25, 35, 37, 42, 46, 54, 57, 61) and *Ecclesia in Asia* in 1999 (n. 25). His strongest statement came rather late in his pontificate in 2001 when he acknowledged the necessity of “structures of participation” for advancing ecclesial communion at every level of the Church’s life by calling for greater listening by pastors, which he insists, are consultative and not deliberative (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 45). In his address during the *ad limina* meeting with bishops of Pennsylvania and New Jersey on 12 September 2004, the same pontiff quoted from his 2003 post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Pastores Gregis* (n. 44) which stated the need for each bishop to develop “a pastoral style which is ever more open to greater collaboration with all”. But with these bishops he offered this telling caveat: “Within a sound ecclesiology of communion, a commitment to creating better structures of participation, consultation and shared responsibility should not be misunderstood as a concession to a secular ‘democratic’ model of governance, but as an intrinsic requirement of the exercise of episcopal authority and a necessary means of strengthening that authority. Pope Benedict XVI has not addressed the subject of participatory structures even obliquely in his encyclicals and apostolic exhortations⁴.”

⁴ See B. Hinze, “The Reception of Vatican II in Participatory Structures of the Church”, p. 31.

“Only” Consultative

The Code of Canon Law categorically states that all the seven participative structures in the particular Churches are *only* (*tantum, tantummodo*) consultative, i.e., either to give counsel or consent to the consulting superior who takes the decision. This restrictive language has generated heated discussion among canonists and pastors since the Code’s promulgation in 1983. By and large, over the years, despite several theological and canonical explanations proposed for its right understanding, the adverb “only” has only diminished the dynamism of the participative process by building up, on the one hand, distrust and indifference on the part of the consultants and, on the other, tokenism and authoritarianism on the part of the consulting superior.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis calls the seven structures of decision-making not as “consultative bodies”, but as “participative bodies” which are forms of “pastoral dialogue” (*EG*, n. 31). This papal perception has called the Church to “rethink” on the competence of the participative structures in the sense that they cannot be merely taken as canonical structures of formal consultation on some aspects of pastoral life, but as dynamic organs of pastoral dialogue about the concerns, needs, challenges and beliefs of the people of God. What the Pope really means by “pastoral dialogue” could be elucidated by his remark in his address to a group of recently appointed bishops taking part in the course organized by the Congregation for Bishops and the Congregation for the Eastern Churches (19 September 2013): “It is impossible to think of a bishop who did not have these diocesan institutions: a presbyteral council, consultors, a pastoral council, a council for financial matters. This means really being with the people. This pastoral presence will enable you to be thoroughly acquainted with the culture, customs and mores of the area, the wealth of holiness that is present there.

Immerse yourselves in your own flock.”⁵ Therefore, in order to imbibe the Pope’s broad-ranging vision set forth for the participative bodies, it is recommended that at least the adverb “only” is eliminated from the canons determining the competence of the consultative bodies.⁶

Are Pastoral Councils Obligatory in all the Parishes?

While the Parish Pastoral Council is not explicitly mentioned in the documents of Vatican Council II, the theological principles which underlie it are clearly enunciated and a rationale for its development is given in *Lumen Gentium*: “... by reason of the knowledge, competence or pre-eminence which they have, the laity are empowered, indeed sometimes obliged, to manifest their opinion in those things which pertain to the good of the Church. If the occasion should arise, this should be done through the institutions established by the Church for that purpose and always with truth, courage and prudence and with reverence and charity towards those who by reason of their office, represent the person of Christ” (*LG*, n. 37).

The 1983 Code of Canon Law gives juridic value to Vatican Council II’s teaching on the vocation and mission of the People of God and provides structures to express and encourage collaborative responsibility on every level of ecclesial administration. Canon 536 specifically deals with Parish Pastoral Councils: “After the diocesan bishop has listened to the presbyteral council and if he judges it opportune, a pastoral council is to be established in each parish; the pastor presides over it, and through it the Christian faithful along with those who share in the pastoral care

⁵ Available at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130919_convegno-nuovi-vescovi.html

⁶ For proposals on other areas that are in need of reform, see S.S. Karambai, “Consultative Bodies in the Particular Churches Revisited in the Light of *Evangelii Gaudium*”, in A. Loretan, - F. Wilfred, (eds.), *Revision of the Codes. An Indian-European Dialogue*, Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2018, pp. 283-292.

of the parish in virtue of their office give their help in fostering pastoral activity. This pastoral council possesses a consultative vote only and is governed by norms determined by the diocesan bishop.”

The legislation in the *CCEO* concerning parish councils is quite different. Can. 295 has mandated two councils—one pastoral and another financial- but it has relegated specific norms to the particular law. In 1998 the Syro-Malabar Church has promulgated particular norms⁷. According to these norms, the participatory structure in the parish is called *Palliyogam* comprising two layers, namely, *Potuyogam* and *Prathinidhiyogam*. Similar norms have also been promulgated by the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church⁸.

Among all the consultative bodies in which the laity participate, it is the parish pastoral council (PPC) that has become the focus of great attention in India. At the national, regional and diocesan levels, the formation of the PPCs is listed as a pastoral priority. At the end of its biennial meeting held in Trivandrum in February 1996, the CBCI stated: “We reflected on the need for greater lay participation in the Church through Parish Pastoral Councils, Basic Christian and Human Communities, lay ministries and Finance committees. In the process we saw that the pastoral role of parish councils needs greater emphasis”.⁹ One year later the CCBI in its ninth plenary assembly held in Mangalore stated: “Parish councils are to be established wherever they do not exist, and be made instruments for building up the parish as a true fellowship, as they share in the pastoral mission of the Church”.¹⁰

⁷ See *Synodal News*, n. 11 (1998)45-74.

⁸ See *The Code of Particular Canons of the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church*, Trivandrum, 2012, pp. 27-31.

⁹ See CBCI, *Final Statements of the General Body Meeting of Catholic Bishops Conference of India (1966-2012)*, edited by T. d’Aquino Sequeira, CBCI Centre, New Delhi, 2012, pp. 93 & 108.

¹⁰ See CCBI Secretariat, *Neo-Pentecostalism: A Pastoral Response*, New Delhi, 1997, p. 5.

Subsequently many dioceses have promulgated statutes mandating the establishment of PPCs in all the parishes. But there does not seem to be in place a mechanism to address difficulties that arise both in the establishing and the actual functioning. At this juncture, the 2004 Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops has given a significant directive, perhaps wrought upon the feedback from pastoral experience, that, after an objective evaluation of the parishes and consulting the presbyteral council, the bishop can declare its existence mandatory at least in the larger parishes¹¹. In the light of this directive, diocesan statutes mandating PPCs in all the parishes must be reviewed. In fact, neither can. 536 of the *CIC* nor can 295 of the *CCEO* requires uniformity of legislation applicable categorically to all the parishes. My own pastoral experience also suggests variety. For six years when I was a pastor in a small rural parish, where there were some practical difficulties to establish the PPC, I used to consult the entire Sunday assembly at the end of the Mass on some significant pastoral matters. The response was indeed fruitful in the sense that it was not strictly a canonical consultation but a pastoral dialogue.

Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life

Pope Francis announced the creation of a separate Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life on 15 August 2016, effective 1 September 2016. It takes over the functions and responsibilities of the **Pontifical Council for the Laity** and the **Pontifical Council for the Family**. It has responsibility “for the promotion of the life and apostolate of the lay faithful, for the pastoral care of the family and its mission according to God’s plan and for the protection and support of human life.” The statutes governing this new entity had been approved *ad experimentum* on 4 June 2016. A revised statute was published on 8 May 2018, effective

¹¹ See Congregation for Bishops, *Apostolorum Successores*, 22 February 2004, n. 210.

13 May. It added to its mission promoting “ecclesial reflection on the identity and mission of women in the Church and in society, promoting their participation”. It is significant to note that article 6, § 3 of the statutes refers to consultative bodies: “It [the dicastery] also promotes the participation of the lay faithful in catechetical instruction, in liturgical and sacramental life, in missionary activity, in works of mercy, charity and human and social promotion. It also supports and encourages its active and responsible presence in parish and diocesan life, and in the advisory organs of governance present in the Church on a universal and particular level”¹². This provision is certainly encouraging. It is not clear, however, how much influence the Dicastery will have over local Churches.

Conclusion

As it is elsewhere, a vibrant and fruitful participation of the laity in the decision-making structures is not possible without a true *nuvus habitis mentis*. Pope Francis’ thinking and above all acting on the basis of a theology of the people of God and hierarchical authority as service is remarkable to bring about the new attitude. His vision of a Church as inverted pyramid is noteworthy: “But in this Church, as in an inverted pyramid, the top is located beneath the base. Consequently, those who exercise authority are called ‘ministers’, because, in the original meaning of the word, they are the least of all.”¹³

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¹² Francis, *Statuto del Dicastero per i Laici, la Famiglia e la Vita*, 8 May 2018.

¹³ Francis, “Address during the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops”, 17 October 2015.