

“That They May All Be One”: The Principle of Collegiality

By Philip C. L. Gray

I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, in them and thou in me, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom thou has given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou has given me in they love for me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, the world has not known thee, but I have known thee; and these know that thou hast sent me. I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them (John 17:20-26, RSV).

When speaking of collegiality, most people usually refer to the unity and apostolic succession that exists among bishops. For example, in the glossary found in certain editions of the Catechism, “collegiality” is defined as,

“The principle that all the bishops of the Church with the Pope at their head form a single “college,” which succeeds in every generation the “college” of the Twelve Apostles, with Peter at their head, which Christ instituted as the foundation for the Church. This college of bishops together with, but never without, the Pope has supreme and full authority over the universal Church (861, 880, 883).¹

None of the articles of the Catechism referenced in the glossary use the term “collegiality.” Nor will you find this term in the Code of Canon Law. Terms used include “college” and “collegial” from which the term “collegiality” is derived. While the definition noted above is not a false statement, and is certainly the most commonly advanced example, it does not recognize that the terms “college” and “collegial” are used in Theology and Canon Law to represent groups other than the College of Bishops. Considering this, the Principle of Collegiality is a broader notion applying to *any group that shares a common purpose and receives from a common source a joint power to pursue that purpose in cooperation with and under the direction of its head.*

This broader notion presents four points that help us understand and apply the Principle of Collegiality. These points express the unity of man with God as intended by the Father and are: (1) A common purpose unites those with power; (2) The power comes from a common source; (3) The power is jointly held; and (4) Power is exercised in cooperation with and under the direction of a common leader or head.

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Second Edition, United States Catholic conference, Inc.–Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994, 1997, p. 871. In the prefatory note to the glossary, the editors acknowledge that the glossary is the work of Archbishop William J. Levada and “does not participate in the approval of the text of the *Catechism* given in the Apostolic Constitution *Fidei depositum* of Pope John Paul II.”

A Common Purpose

The last verses of Jesus' Priestly Prayer cited above were offered during the Last Supper. These words reveal the purpose of all men—to behold the glory of the Son shared with the Father from eternity, and to be one with the Trinity in that glory. Saints go to heaven not just to be with Jesus as though we were with a friend, but *to know Him as He is*.

Here on earth, we “know” by our experiences. It will be the same in heaven. The differences are that saints do not suffer the limitations of concupiscence, time or space. They experience God in His fullness without these limitations. The Church Militant cannot comprehend this reality, simply because we continue to suffer these limitations until death frees us. At that time, if God finds us worthy in His Mercy, we will share the same unity with God that the Persons of the Trinity share with each other (John 17:21).

Jesus' self-sacrifice on Calvary obtained for all men the mercy and grace necessary for union with God. Those of us still bound by concupiscence, time and space experience that grace within the limitations of our human experiences in this world. These experiences of grace prepare us for the final unity with God that death or the end of the world will provide for us. Thus, the purpose of collegiality in the Church is union with God.

A Common Source of Power

To provide us an experience of mercy and grace in this vale of tears, Jesus commissioned the apostles to act in His name and with His power (Mt. 18:18; Jn. 13:12-15). As a human person, Jesus knew the limitations of space and time, and He remained in Palestine throughout His entire life. He did not intend the apostles to do the same, but willed that all men would have the Gospel preached to them. By commissioning the apostles, Jesus acts through them to continue His work on earth. They search out souls on earth as Jesus pursued souls when He descended into hell.² He made this crystal clear during His Priestly Prayer with the words, “As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth” (Jn. 17:18-19, RSV).

The Apostles and their successors have received a commission from Christ Himself to continue the work of salvation here on earth. By this commission, they receive His power to accomplish the task for which He sends them. Because of their human limitations, the number of apostles must be great enough to reach the ends of the earth with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet, because they share the same Spirit of God, they are one in both vision and mission.

In turn, the Apostles and their successors shared the grace of the Holy Spirit through Baptism and Confirmation. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, these men and women entered the unity of the Church and shared her mission. As stated in Canon 204§1: “The Christian faithful are those who, inasmuch as they have been incorporated in Christ through baptism, have been constituted as the people of God. *For this reason, made sharers in their own way in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and royal function, they are called to exercise the mission which God has entrusted to the Church to fulfill in the world, in accord with the condition proper to each*” (emphasis added).

Some of these men were also ordained as priests and deacons. “Priests, prudent cooperators with the Episcopal order as well as its aids and instruments...constitute one priesthood with their bishop, although that priesthood is comprised of different functions.”³ “At a lower level of the hierarchy are

² cf: *Roman Catechism* I, 6, 3; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, arts. 631-637).

³ Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution of the Church (*Lumen gentium*), art. 28 as found in: Abbott, William, *The Documents of Vatican II*, Herder and Herder, 1966, p.54.

deacons...strengthened by sacramental grace, in communion with the bishop and his group of priests, they serve the People of God in the ministry of the liturgy, of the word, and of charity.”⁴

It must be noted that though the source of power is the same, the power received differs according to the circumstances of the person who receives the power and the intentions of the source. Ultimately, God is the source of the power we enjoy as bishop, priest, deacon, or baptized laity. But, the role each person plays in the exercise of power differs substantially in accord with our individual conditions of life.

Joint Power to Pursue a Common Purpose

Although the power shared and exercised is not equal among all, the source and purpose of all power and authority are common. This common source demands that power be exercised within the Church in a joint manner that recognizes legitimate diversity of circumstance and condition of life. It is important to note that this joint exercise of power does not mean that more than one person must be a part of every decision or act of authority that takes place. It does mean that every decision and act of authority must reflect the unity of Faith and common purpose shared by all.

For example, when a bishop issues a pastoral letter on the intrinsic dignity of marriage and the intrinsic evil of homosexual acts, he does so as a diocesan bishop exercising his obligation to teach the Faith to the People of God in his diocese. However, the teaching is not his own. It is the Church’s teaching as truth revealed by Christ. His obligation to collegiality requires him to restrict his teaching to those statements that do not contradict the Deposit of Faith. In this way, it is not the person of the bishop who teaches, but Christ and His Church working through that bishop to spread the Gospel.

The Life of the Church

A brief review of the Code of Canon Law identifies a number of groups to which the Principle of Collegiality applies.

(1) The People of God; (2) College of Bishops; (3) Diocese; (4) College of Cardinals; (5) Religious Orders; and (6) Other Juridic Persons. Space does not permit us to examine the collegial dimension of each group, and so I limit the discussion to the first two.⁵

A: The People of God

I have already cited the text of Canon 204§1 in which the Church recognizes the power given to the People of God by virtue of Baptism. In terms of exercising this power, the circumstances of a person’s way of life determine the exercise of power. By far, the most extensive exercise is shown by the laity, whose responsibility is to engage the world in secular affairs and imbue it with the grace given through the Church. This use of power fulfills the mandate given by God in Genesis 1:26-28.

After the fall of Adam, the whole created order was affected by sin. The natural order became wild and reflects the continued struggle with concupiscence and personal sin that all men suffer. Christ redeemed man, and in turn, man has an obligation to use this grace to imbue the created order with

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 55.

⁵ Canon 127 provides norms for acts of power that require a superior to seek counsel and/or consent from a “college or group of persons.” Canon 119 provides general norms for collegial acts taken by juridic persons, and is often applied in the statutes of ecclesiastical foundations, public associations of the faithful and religious institutes. Canon 120 makes reference to the viability of an aggregate of persons when only “one member of a collegial juridic person survives.” Space does not permit a comprehensive list of canons that regulate the exercise of power within a diocesan curia, particularly as it pertains to the administration of goods. However, there are a number of canons that establish collegial bodies within the diocese (eg: presbyteral council and council of consulters) and vest those bodies with the obligatory right to offer counsel or consent to a decision of the bishop. In some cases, a bishop’s decision is invalid without having first sought the counsel or consent from one of these collegial bodies (eg: Canon 515§2 as regards altering a parish).

virtue in preparation for the Last Day. This is the task of the laity; to use the power obtained through baptism to convert the world from within. We do this by making our public lives reflect the Gospel of Life in all affairs—business transactions, political discussion and decision making, social contacts, prudent use of environmental resources, etc.

The task of the ordained is different, but remains directed toward a common purpose. Although they constitute a portion of the People of God, the ordained have the primary task of serving the laity so the task of the laity can be fulfilled. Among other ways, this service is expressed in the governance of the College of Bishops over the universal Church (Canon 204§2).

B: College of Bishops

Canon 204 §2. This Church, constituted and organized in this world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church governed by the successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with him.

Canon 375 §1. Bishops, who by divine institution succeed to the place of the Apostles through the Holy Spirit who has been given to them, are constituted pastors in the Church, so that they are teachers of doctrine, priests of sacred worship, and ministers of governance.

§2. Through episcopal consecration itself, bishops receive with the function of sanctifying also the functions of teaching and governing; *by their nature, however, these can only be exercised in hierarchical communion with the head and members of the college* (emphasis added).

The College of Bishops constitutes a portion of the People of God, the portion that governs the Church. Their consecration as bishop empowers them for this task, not as a vicar of the Pope, but as a Vicar of Christ.⁶ Though not his vicar, bishops rely on their communion with the Pope to exercise their powers of teaching and ruling.⁷

The Pope is the visible source of unity for the entire Church. As such, he is the head of the People of God and, by virtue of that fact, head of that portion known as the College of Bishops. These are not two distinct roles. Canon 331 expresses this point clearly by identifying the Pope as “head of the college of bishops” and possessing “immediate and universal ordinary power in the Church.” While both the College of Bishops and the Pope possess “supreme and full” power, only the Pope possesses “immediate and universal ordinary power.” These identifiers mean that he exercises his power without mediation, direction, or required consultation. He simply has the power to govern the Church and can exercise that power at will.

In contrast, the College of Bishops exists only with the Pope (Canon 336). Although the College of Bishops is vested with supreme and full power over the Universal Church, the Pope determines when and how that power is exercised (Canons 337-338). Without his confirmation, no act by the College of Bishops has effect.

The expression of power in the Church is shown in the Triple *Munera* or offices of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King. The Priestly Office is known in law as the Sanctifying Office of the Church. Canons 834-1253 regulate the use of this power. It is the only power exercised by a bishop that can be exercised outside communion with the Pope. Because the sacraments provide

⁶ *Op. cit.*, *Lumen gentium*, arts. 20-21.

⁷ Their power of sanctifying can be exercised even in schism. This is why we recognize the sacraments of schismatic groups, but do not give credence to their teaching or ability to rule.

the immediate and ordinary means of obtaining the grace of salvation, access to this grace must be as generous as Christ's willingness to die on the cross. This generosity of grace is expressed by the recognition that even a schismatic bishop has the power to sanctify, and thus assist souls into heaven. Even so, his acts remain acts of collegiality as they reflect a common purpose, intention, and method derived from a commonly held power given by God. It is the power exercised by a bishop easiest to understand as service to the People of God.

The Prophetic Office is known as the Teaching Office of the Church. Canons 747-833 regulate this power. Of particular note, Canon 747 recognizes that Christ entrusted the Deposit of Faith to the entire Church, not only to the College of Bishops. Canons 749 and 750 leave little opportunity for a Catholic to doubt that only the Pope and the College of Bishops have the power to define doctrine. This arrangement—the Deposit of Faith entrusted to the entire Church, but only the College of Bishops and the Pope possessing the power to define doctrine—expresses the collegiality of the People of God and the necessary cooperation between bishops and the faithful as intended by Christ.

The collegiality of the College of Bishops is also expressed by individual bishops who act as authentic teachers and instructors of the faith within their respective dioceses. These bishops act as Vicars of Christ. But in fidelity to Him, they must remain faithful to the College of Bishops and its head, the Pope. They cannot legitimately teach anything contrary to the faith without compromising their salvation and harming unity (cf: Canon 753). Rather, their teaching must be directed toward the proper formation and instruction of the faithful to assist them in understanding the truth and applying it in daily life.

The Kingly Office is known as the Ruling Office of the Church and regulated by canons throughout the Code. In exercise, the Ruling Office is intended to be an expression of service to the People of God reflecting the same spirit of service shown by Christ who “did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at. Rather, he emptied himself and took the form of a slave” (Phil. 2:6-7) and washed the feet of sinful men (Jn. 13:4-11). While the People of God must not grasp for equality with God, we must grasp for union with Him, and the Ruling Office exercised by bishops must assist us in that endeavor.

There are many examples of collegiality shown within the Ruling Office. A portion of the College of Bishops known as the College of Cardinals elects the Pope. Synods of bishops and conferences of bishops establish laws that govern the faithful in their charge. Finally, individual bishops issue norms to regulate ecclesial life and advance legitimate discipline in compliance with universal law. Such ordering is necessary lest chaos and confusion rule the Church. In all circumstances, the governance exercised cannot violate divine laws and must be imbued with virtue. However, since Our Lord entrusted the care of His Church to sinful men, collegiality in practice is sometimes less than ideal

Human nature being what it is sometimes the Principle of Collegiality becomes distorted and can stifle the witness of individual bishops by reducing the exercise of their Teaching Office to the least common denominator. We might speculate that this is what Alfredo Cardinal Ottaviani had in mind some forty years ago when he was reported to have said that the only passage in Scripture that he could find in support of collegiality was Matthew 26:56: *And they all fled.*

Unfortunately, the Ruling Office lends itself most easily to abuse. Because of concupiscence, power has the tendency to corrupt man. And, just as Eve's curse was to be lorded over by her husband, so it is a curse of the People of God when a bishop or groups of bishops lord it over them. *Christifidelis* readers know how frequently a prudential decision—like closing a parish or selling a church—is evaluated by higher authority simply on whether or not the decision falls

within a bishop's right to make the decision. Very little consideration is given to the Principle of Collegiality, from which the Principle of Subsidiarity flows.

If we evaluate abuses of power in accord with the Principle of Collegiality, we would turn to the four identifying factors of collegiality and ask first, how does this decision or act of power advance the unity of those affected with God? As a canon lawyer who provides representation and advocacy for those grieved in the Church, I frequently find myself assisting clients through crisis of faith caused by abusive acts of power that are termed "prudential decisions." I cannot help but conclude that the inferior notion of "protecting assets" or "saving face" all too often supersedes the primary purpose of all men that must motivate every act of power in the Church—the union of each man with God.

If we jump this first hurdle, we must then ask, how does this act of power reflect the source of the power, namely Jesus Christ? He humbled Himself to become man so we might be raised to union with God. Does the act of power reflect this same humility and service?

A prudent bishop would then ask, "How does my proposed act of power reflect the prudence of the Church, with which I hold this power jointly?" By this question, a prudent bishop would consider not only the opinions of his immediate colleagues, but because he is in apostolic succession, he would consider the historic prudence shown by saintly bishops who encountered similar situations. Would that every bishop be a student of apostolic succession, not in the sense of historical line, but in the sense of historical use of power.

Finally, for a bishop to truly exercise collegiality, he must consider the actions and intentions of the Pope. Unfortunately, in many circumstances the Pope is considered an equal and not the head. His intentions are superseded by the intentions of an individual bishop. A prevalent example is the application of the document *Ecclesia Dei*. It remains the Pope's intention that a generous application of the provisions in that document be given the People of God. Unfortunately, many bishops do not want any semblance of Latin in the Mass, much less a whole Mass in Latin. They impose their own prudential judgment that allowing Masses celebrated under the 1962 Missal will cause division, and do not provide any evidence to support their conclusory opinion. Contrary to their stated purpose, such decision encourages many vulnerable Catholics to leave the Church for a schismatic group.

Conclusion

The purpose of any act determines its objective good. In the same way, the purpose for collegiality determines its objective worth and demands an application that advances that purpose. And so, we can only understand collegiality if we understand its purpose—that is, continuing the work of salvation here on earth by dispensing the mercy and grace of God obtained by Jesus' sacrifice on Calvary through teaching truth, ruling through service, and sanctifying with generosity. And, the College of Bishops exercise collegiality only within the broader group to which they belong and serve, namely, the People of God.