

• DECREE ON THE PASTORAL OFFICE OF BISHOPS +P.J. Cullinane

During the Council, the Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops (hereafter CD after its Latin title) was drafted in synch with the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (hereafter LG). LG is a major doctrinal statement, and a linchpin of the Council's teachings. CD is institutional and organizational. It contains practical details that would have been out of place in a doctrinal statement, but which needed the weight of the Council behind them.

LG affirms that all the baptized share in the priestly, prophetic and regal role of Christ, and that those in Holy Orders do so in a different and distinctive way. CD specifies ways the bishop is to carry out his servant role. It emphasizes his teaching role and the need for his voice to be heard in the public square. The Council produced separate Decrees regarding the ministry of priests, Religious life, and the apostolate of the laity.

Importantly, and following some of the Council's most dramatic debates, LG and CD taught that bishops, by virtue of their ordination, form one "college of bishops", and that this world-wide body, always including the bishop of Rome, exercises "full authority over the universal church". More specifically, CD outlined what would become the Synods of Bishops (which were intended to be a form of on-going collaboration between the bishops of the world and the bishop of Rome); Bishops' Conferences and Federations of Bishops' Conferences (intended to facilitate collaboration between bishops at local and regional levels); and Councils of priests and Pastoral councils (intended to facilitate collaboration between laity, priests and bishops within dioceses.)

Some of the reforms called for in this Decree are still works in progress. The Church is still learning how to practise collegiality, how to reform the Roman Curia, how to conduct bishops' synods, and how to practise collaboration between laity, priests and bishops. We were not used to these practices. For centuries, one-sided emphasis on the role of the Pope had diminished the role of bishops in the governance of the universal church. For even longer, entrenched clericalism had disenfranchised the laity, and especially women. Turning all this around was always going to take time.

CD sets up structures to promote at all levels dialogue, cooperation and participation. Such structures are necessary, but on their own do not transform relationships. That depends on being able to experience the church as the community of Jesus' disciples. This in turn emanates from "communion" which was a key motif of the Council – best described in Jesus' own words: "Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world will believe it was you who sent me". (John 17:21)

It is this communion of divine life that expresses itself in Christian community. These words also highlight the fact that the practical organization of the Church has a goal beyond itself, namely to witness to Christ and God's love for the world.