

Articles and letters by Robert Consedine, Brian Knowles and Julian Wagg (NZ Catholic Dec 2- 15) exemplify how the problem of clericalism, which Pope Francis rightly condemns, can be critiqued with great frankness and realism, and yet without people-bashing. They recognize it is a culture we have all – ordained and lay - been born into. It is alien to our better instincts, and a distorted way of being Church that we have inherited. With Robert Consedine, I acknowledge that many of our best pastors, past and present, have followed their better instincts and acted counter-culturally.

What I want to say about bishops is intended in the same spirit: it's not about looking for people to blame but about inherited systems and ways of doing things, and the culture in which they are rooted.

But first, a closer look at the problem. Robert Consedine rightly focuses on lack of accountability. This is clericalism's main and most far-reaching manifestation, and it has very ancient origins: it was precisely in order to reinforce the authority of Christian ministers that Christian apologists of 3rd & 4<sup>th</sup> centuries drew on Old Testament imagery to depict Christian ministry, which up until then was more evangelical. Then, in 11<sup>th</sup> century, Pope Gregory VII tried to extricate the Church from an unhealthy dependence on emperors and secular powers by claiming for the Church a kind of independent jurisdiction. This gradually led to the Church marginalizing itself in a kind of spiritual realm, while the world went its own way, culminating in a post- Enlightenment sense of not needing the Church. This left the Church ill-equipped to cope with, benefit from, or contribute to Modernity. And, the point being made here: it produced a sense of non-accountability – of hierarchy to the laity, and of Church to society – with consequences we are now trying to reverse. Canonical provisions for separate and privileged status have long since been dropped, but a residue of that culture lived on.

The needed corrective to this culture will be the greater participation of lay women and men in both management and governance within the Church. (Governance is separable from Holy Orders, and able to be shared by ordained and lay.) But greater participation does not mean a wider group of people doing things the ways we already do them. It calls for a way of acting that is qualitatively different, involving synodality. This means that pastoral planning and decision-making need to emerge out of "walking together" – all the baptized closely listening to each other; and the practice of "discernment".

Describing discernment, Pope Francis says it involves "something more than intelligence and common sense"; it "includes but transcends the insights we draw from the human sciences"; it "includes reason and prudence but goes beyond them"; and even "the Church's sound norms are not sufficient" (*Gaudete et Exultate*, 166, 170). If we don't put into practice that "something more" we would be obstructing the Pope's plea for synodality to be practised at every level of Church life. This is the jeopardy of bishops who are busy men, who are well familiar with the issues, who know the Church's norms, and who do consult people with the appropriate expertise. So, taking the extra time to convene and listen to a wider representation of the faithful can easily seem to be an unnecessary waste of time. This seems obvious, in the way that what looks obvious inside any given culture isn't necessarily obvious to others outside that culture! (From inside the clerical culture it is possible to speak out against clericalism and still cling to its trappings – without even noticing the contradiction.)

A synodical way of doing things is not just a matter of "having a synod". And discernment is a qualitatively different way of knowing what the Gospel requires of us. To give a practical example: over recent years the bishops have given, and continue to give, much thought to our model of seminary

formation. They realize there may be ways of providing pre-ordination and post-ordination formation that involve lay men and women to a greater extent in the processes of formation, alongside seminary staff. One way of exploring these possibilities would be within the framework of “the Church’s sound norms”, “intelligence and common sense”, “reason and prudence” etc, for which the bishops need look no further than themselves and expert advice.

But Pope Francis’ call for synodality at every level of Church life, and what he says about discernment, suggest the need for a different way – one that taps into the “sensus fidelium,” and therefore listening to the wider body of the faithful – those whose mission and sanctification takes place in precisely that world from which the Church had earlier isolated itself. “[P]rayerful discernment must be born of a readiness to listen: to the Lord and to others, and to reality itself, which always challenges us in new ways. Only if we listen do we have the freedom to set aside our own partial or insufficient ideas, or usual habits and ways of seeing things... The Spirit alone can penetrate what is obscure and hidden in every situation, and grasp its every nuance, so that the newness of the Gospel can emerge in another light.” (172,173).

Francis was speaking of individual discernment, but there are processes for group discernment too. Given the nature of clericalism, the need to involve the wider body of the faithful would seem to be obvious – at least to those less affected by the clerical culture. Of course, there are other areas of pastoral planning that could also benefit by the practice of synodality and the practice of discernment.

Let us be as frank as Pope Francis: “intelligence and common sense”, “reason and prudence”, and even “the Church’s sound norms” cannot, on their own, take the Church’s planning to where it needs to go. We need that “something more” that comes out of discernment, and out of synodality which is its context.