

Comment

Bishops matter very little, so far as most Catholics see. The pope, of course, is our cynosure. What he says and does will always make news, whether people like it or not. He sets the tone for Catholics in a way that no bishop ever could. For most people, anyway, the pope is the only real bishop in the Catholic Church. His is the face of the shepherd in most people's dreams, nearer than ever since television. His only rival is the local parish priest. He too sets the tone in a way that no bishop ever could. What the parish priest "allows" matters far more than anything that the bishop says or does. Whether the elimination of the episcopate from general Catholic consciousness must be traced to the defeat of Febronianism is a question we may leave for another day. The fact of the matter is that, for most Catholics, the Church is not perceived as essentially "episcopal".

With Vatican II, however, episcopacy re-surfaced with a certain éclat. At the level of theological theory, at any rate, the Catholic Church reappeared as a "communion of dioceses". This ecclesiology required a massive shift of consciousness towards the ancient idea of the bishop as the centre of Christian worship and witness in the diocese. It also involved the creation of the national episcopal conference, to effect "a holy union of energies" (*Christus Dominus*, paragraph 37). In England and Wales, as elsewhere, the bishops' conference established a whole apparatus of commissions and advisory bodies (seventeen at the last count), to deal with everything from ecumenism to racial justice. None of these commissions has more than a handful of episcopal members.

This structure the bishops now want to demolish. The recent Report – *In the House of the Living God* – recommends that there should instead be only three commissions, entirely of bishops. The reasons for change are many. For example: "Given the dynamic of the commission structures, too much attention was directed to national issues, too little towards the concerns of the local church". Again: "Bishops were known to feel that at times they were swamped by unfamiliar business and in danger of losing control over their agenda and priorities". But one of the deepest reasons alleged seems to be fear that the present structure is making "the Catholic

community in England and Wales” into a “national Church” – and *that* (it is clearly felt) is a horrendous and heretical prospect. A “national Church” is apparently a quite different thing from “the communion of local churches in a particular country”. The difference is subtle, yet it surely embodies an important truth about the nature of the Catholic Church – even if a certain former Polish bishop might be able to think of reasons for having a strong “national Church”.

Implicitly, the Report thus rejects the idea of competing with, or eventually replacing, the Church of England as the national Church of the English people. It is not hard to find mystical legitimations of Anglicanism that appeal to its “Englishness”. In that light (or obfuscation), “the Catholic community”, with its Murphies and Guazzellis, will never be assimilated. (Actually Runcie sounds as Scotch as Hume, and Couve de Murville is as English as Montefiore.) If the destruction of the present structure of episcopal commissions is necessary to enable the dioceses of England and Wales to discover their mission to worship and to witness entirely beyond all such cultural and ethnic perspectives then we cannot but welcome it.

It is much more likely, however, that the proposed contraction to three exclusively episcopal commissions will indeed leave the bishops with control over their agenda and priorities, and the voice of the Catholic Church on national issues – which is after all hardly more than a quizzical whisper – will fall silent altogether. “There is a tendency to adopt a secular attitude”, the Report admonishes us:

“to think that efficiency and effectiveness demand a national structure and an organization which from a national nerve centre sends out messages to the limbs and coordinates response. It is essential to remember that with the Church we are always dealing with a divine mystery. . . . We must respect the nature of the diocese as the Church of God in a particular place”.

Good Vatican II ecclesiology anyway, and we await the first signs of new life at the centre of every diocese in our own communion.