

“Mission . . . Where Possible”

P.J. Doyle

To many outsiders the Catholic Church still appears authoritarian and monolithic, yet closer inspection reveals a very different picture. Indeed it could be argued that in some instances the Church gives the appearance of quasi-congregationalism¹, set within networks of prayer groups, which themselves reflect a spirit of loose independence and quietism. This paper raises the question of the place of the laity within the organisation and structure of the hierarchic church. Recently *The Universe* carried the headline “More power to the laity”, suggesting radical changes as the increasing priest shortage begins to bite². The report cites concerns in Scotland, Hexham and Newcastle, and Hallam Dioceses. It appears as if at last the Church is beginning to take up matters first raised at the Second Vatican Council.

The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity makes specific reference to establishing national congresses and pastoral councils at diocesan, deanery and parish levels. Unfortunately the decree permits a “cop out” by adding the phrase “where possible”³. This provokes the obvious questions: why has this aspect of the Council been virtually ignored, or, at the very least, haphazardly implemented, and further why has the laity so tamely acquiesced? Even more interesting is the knowledge that the Church in this country immediately before and after the First World War seems to have been well organized, with federations at city and diocesan levels, a national Confederation and annual National Congresses, which admittedly became triennial in 1920 before petering out after 1929. Encouraged by the formidable Bishop Casartelli of Salford, they provided a platform for the Church, where clerics and lay persons could respond to national and international issues, and to organize effectively with regard to legislation on Church Schools and family life. The Congresses in particular drew together the hierarchy, most national Catholic organizations, plus Members of the House of Lords and Commons. Significantly the first Congress held at Leeds in 1910 occurred during the educational controversies surrounding proposed legislation on Church Schools by the Liberal Government. But, and perhaps this is of some comfort to later generations, the Federation appears to have been a “top-down” movement, which even in Salford, with the support of a zealous bishop and a full-time organizer, failed to unite disparate groups largely

because of its political partisanship⁴.

Nonetheless, perhaps the initial weak response to David Steel's abortion legislation in 1967 stemmed from the absence of such an authoritative, inclusive national organization. A National Pastoral Council was held in Liverpool a decade ago, and a major national conference staged in the same city in 1991 to commemorate the centenary of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. At the latter there were calls from the floor for the convening of another National Conference, but who appointed, chose, elected, or selected the delegates, and to whom—if anybody—did they report back? What is/was the lasting impact? How were the conclusions diffused? Without an effective network built on the basic unit of the parish, grandiose ventures are almost bound to fail. In this ecumenical age there are models from other denominations on which we can reflect and learn: the Church of England's Synods and Assemblies, and the Methodist Conferences spring to mind. At the moment, to put it kindly and mildly, there is no National Pastoral Council, few, if any, diocesan or deanery Councils, some city or town pastoral councils, and more parish Councils—some with finance committees⁵, but presumably with a variety of constitutions and terms of reference. However there have been some innovations, for instance, the Church in East London has been using a method of "pastoral planning by objectives", but an article outlining its work makes no explicit reference to either deanery or parish councils while the Scottish Hierarchy has organized a national conference with the theme of "A Challenge for the Nineties", which apparently is trying to involve all parishes in discussion and action⁶.

So nationally there appears to be a patchwork quilt, a very fragmented church, and for the laity it is potluck as to whether you are included or excluded, empowered or marginalised. Much depends on the Parish Priest, who can always fall back on the decree's "where possible" clause. If Abraham's test is applied to the "where possible plea", then how many parishes should have proper Councils—90%, 70%, 50%, 10%, 1%? This variety of practice is in itself very catholic, and perhaps over-strict external control of parochial life could also be counterproductive, but if there is no national system to involve the laity, then the "age of the laity" will remain a pious refrain.

As already indicated, the building bricks at parish level have to be laid before any national, diocesan or even town organisation can function, let alone flourish. While accepting that a case cannot be developed from one example, the experiences of one city-wide Pastoral Council highlights more than just structural problems. The case in question is that of the Hull and District Pastoral Council—its programme, successes and failures during the past two years. The population of the city and its immediate

suburbs is around 300,000, and it is difficult to calculate precisely the number of Catholics in the area. The Spencer Demographic Survey of 1961 suggested that Catholics were 8.1% of the City's population, which then stood at 300,000, i.e. 24,500. More recently, in 1990, the Health Authority's Annual Report (covering the city and Holderness) produced a figure of only 7%, i.e. 21,000, which (if correct) is a marked fall in the last 30 years. However, accordingly to the Middlesbrough Diocesan Year Book, the school population, including nurseries and the Sixth Form, was 6847. Accepting that a sizeable percentage of pupils are not Catholic, and taking into account those children of practising Catholics in state, private schools and Catholic boarding schools, projections might indicate a higher figure—perhaps closer to 8% or 9%, i.e. 26,000/27,000. So compared with most northern towns, Hull has a small Catholic population, and the overall level of practice, in what is a very secular city, is low. Within the prescribed area there are 20 parishes and mass centres, with 29 priests, including the Marist Fathers, plus 23 nuns from the Sisters of Mercy and the Daughters of Charity, to which the lay ministry should be added, i.e. the Eucharistic Ministers and teachers in the one secondary and seven primary schools⁴. There is one Pastoral Centre, which unfortunately is sited some way from the City Centre, and the Catholic "strongholds" (a relative term) in the North West. Against this very crude statistical base, the success or otherwise, at least numerically, of the Council can be assessed.

"Never mind the quality, feel the width" is an old adage, and can be reversed: sparsity of numbers does not in any way detract from the richness of experience of those attending, but it does raise questions of commitment and organisation. Despite city-wide publicity, only 40 attended a Saturday of meditation, led by the distinguished retreat giver and writer, Father Ian Pettit, O.S.B.⁵. Two series of talks, sponsored by the Council on *Rerum Novarum*, *Centesimus Annus* and the *Social Gospel*, averaged 50, including a large ecumenical presence. Those talks were at a city centre venue (free, with coffee provided), held in Winter and Spring. A further series in the light nights of Summer had similar, if not worse, attendances—the Abbot of Ampleforth on prayer, 50; a talk on marriage, only 15! and their own Bishop⁶ on Crime and Punishment, 26. At best, the average attendance per parish is 2, but it is obvious, given significant numbers from a few parishes, the involvement of others is nil. In Lent, in response to traditionalists, Stations of the Cross were organized on an area basis, but the "turn-out" was abysmal. But turning back to the "golden days" of the Salford Federation, all was not well. Despite mass rallies at Belle Vue, one priest could write of colleagues as "secretly hostile", "tolerates existence", branches "defunct", and "no branch in his parish,

nor would he tolerate one", and in the two largest parishes in Manchester—St. Wilfrid's and St. Patrick's—with over 20,000 parishioners, the Federation had a mere 150 members, less than 1%¹¹.

On the other hand, there have been some successes, Pope John Paul II asked for his encyclical *Centesimus Annus* to be studied by the laity. How many other series of talks were there in the country? The Pastoral Council, in its sponsoring role, helped to form a new ecumenical *Rerum Novarum* Society to proclaim the Christian message of Social Justice. Again, in its enabling role, the Council has assisted in making the laity aware of a major environmental initiative in the City's twin city of Freetown, Sierra Leone. Inspired by the local CAFOD groups, £6,000 was raised in church collection during Lent 1992. A drop-in centre has been sensibly established on a modest basis one morning per week, and has achieved relative success. Likewise the absence of a Catholic Marriage Advisory Service in this city is still on the agenda, because of the Council.

Perhaps a trickle-down approach does not work, perhaps without Councils in every, or at least a majority of parishes, no Pastoral Council can operate. Otherwise representatives operate in a vacuum, with no accountability. Also the test of subsidiarity¹², a very Catholic principle, needs to be applied; that is the Pastoral Council should only perform those tasks which individual parishes cannot. Does this rule out area Stations of the Cross and Retreats, but include adult education programmes? Do most priests and parishes regard the Council as merely another group or society, on par with the S.V.P.? Does this experience indicate something radically wrong with the Pastoral Council, or a moribund Church, or one in which parishes, groups, individuals get on with their own thing, regardless of official structures, preferring informal prayer groups, etc.—in other words, quasi-congregationalism? If the Church is now dependent on free-standing parishes and single focus groups, the question needs to be posed, what is the most effective way to witness, evangelise and minister? Probably, subsidiarity-wise, different ways to operate at diocesan, deanery, city, parish or group levels.

So what should a Pastoral Council, presumably including all the clergy, sisters, parishes, schools, societies and organizations, do, that parishes cannot? Co-ordinate? Enable? Sponsor? Yes, but co-ordinate, enable and sponsor what? The list below is not exhaustive; it is an attempt to define the inter and supra parochial matters, but not in any batting order: adult education programmes, major Third World initiatives (like inter-city twinnings), other foreign initiatives (e.g. Hull's new link with Szczecin, Poland), support for specialized chaplaincies and ministries, financial and, in other ways, drawing on the city-wide talents of the laity (e.g. the Chaplaincies to both Universities, the College of Further

Education, prisons, hospitals, seafarers, theatres, hotels, etc.)—ensuring that gaps are filled in the apostolate (e.g. the absence of a Catholic Marriage Advisory Centre), involvement with Local Authorities over City Challenge, Task Force, etc.—thereby ensuring a Christian presence and voice. City wide campaigns during Elections, and possibly offering an overview and strategic assessment of the Decade of Evangelisation, including the very necessary demographic surveys.

Are there other matters which, if on the agenda, would stimulate attendance? What of diocesan debt, the parish level for the schools debt, how should these be assessed and allocated in the future? If the laity knew the full facts, the suspicion is that collections would increase greatly. Parish boundaries, use of our limited resources, co-ordination of mass times, even the fostering of more vocations and ministry to young people, and the lapsed. This is not to suggest that the Pastoral Council should run anything, but it should be some kind of umbrella organisation, helping the Bishop and clergy, taking some of the burdens and cares off their shoulders so that their priestly tasks can be carried out.

Finally, should some attempt be made, but by whom, whether at national, provincial or diocesan level, to ensure that properly elected parish councils are initiated throughout England and Wales? It is very necessary, not least because the outsider and indeed the insider, could well ask what kind of Church tolerates such a haphazard system. Although in danger of repeating the obvious, how can the Church—that is the whole Church—respond effectively to such questions as World Poverty, Abortion, Euthanasia, Genetic Engineering, Religious Education, Sunday Trading, etc, without such forums? Are we no longer seen to be a strong pressure or lobbying group? Just ask what did your diocese, deanery or parish do in the last General Election to demonstrate any specific Catholic, let alone Christian, concern, and if something was organized, by whom and how many of the faithful were involved? The Catholic Church is the Church of the Sheep and the Goats, the Good and the Bad Fish; of many talents, houses and rooms, demonstrating its very Catholicity by having a variety of groups, societies, organizations and confraternities. No-one wishes to impose strait-jackets or stifle diversity and pluralism, but the priests, the professionals operate within clear structures. Surely in this decade of evangelisation and a very secular environment, the lack of such a framework for parishes and the laity is more and more a glaring weakness.

- 1 See John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community, 1570–1850*, 1975: p. 337f for early examples of Catholic “congregationalism”.
- 2 *Universe*, September 6, 1992.
- 3 *The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbot, S.J., General Editor, Very Rev. Mgr.

- Joseph Gallagher, Translation Editor, 1966: p. 501, 508 and 515.
- 4 *North West Labour History*, Issue No. 16, 1991/92. Patrick Doyle, "Accommodation or Confrontation: Catholic Response to the Formation of the Labour Party".
 - 5 Bishop Harris of Middlesbrough in a recent Pastoral letter has recommended that all Parishes set up Finance Committees: *Middlesbrough Diocesan Catholic Voice*, September 1992.
 - 6 *New Blackfriars*, November 1987. Kathleen Walsh, "Questioning the Idea of Lay Ministries". *The Tablet*, September 5, 1992: p. 1114, "Scottish Catholics look to the Future".
 - 7 John Hickey, Urban Catholics, "Urban Catholicism in England and Wales from 1829 to the Present Day", 1967: p.13. Hull Heath Authority: *Department of Public Health Annual Report*, 1991, p. 37. *Diocese of Middlesbrough Year Book*, 1992.
 - 8 See William J . Rademacher, *Lay Ministry a Theological, Spiritual and Pastoral Handbook*, 1991.
 - 9 Ian Pettit, O.S.B ., author of several spiritual works, e.g. *The God who Speaks*, 1991.
 - 10 Bishop Harris, who has since retired.
 - 11 Patrick J . Doyle, unpublished essay on the Salford Federation.
 - 12 Theodor Herr, with an Introduction by Rodger Charles, S.J., *Catholic Social Teaching, a Textbook of Christian Insights*, 1991, p 63f.

Aquinas on God's Knowledge of Evil Intentions

Montague Brown

In order to understand how God could know evil intentions, two things are requisite: an understanding of how God knows and an understanding of the nature of evil. It is a well-known doctrine of Thomas Aquinas that God knows his creation through knowing himself. As the ultimate explanation of potentiality and change in the world, it could not be that God himself is in any way potential. Hence he does not learn about his creation from his creatures. Rather, God knows all his creatures and their actions through knowing his own simple nature. It is also a well-known doctrine that evil is the privation of good, and that evil is only known through knowing good. Putting these two doctrines together, it follows that God knows evil in the world by knowing the good that he is. While this explanation seems adequate to explain physical evils (e.g., the mouse's demise is explained by God's understanding himself as able to be participated by the good which is eagle), it is not clear how