

ACCOUNTABILITY WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

In light of the clergy sex abuse scandal in the American Catholic Church, various reform groups, such as Call to Action, Voice of the Faithful, and independent experts and media commentators are calling for the accountability of the leaders of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. In the feudal system in which the Church functions, accountability is only in one direction, e.g., parish staff people are accountable to the parish pastor, the parish pastor is accountable to the diocesan bishop, and the diocesan bishop is accountable to the pope in Rome. Those who call for structural reform say that accountability should be in two directions: upward and downward. A pastor should be accountable to his parishioners and a bishop to his priests and those under his care.

Accountability, however, is more complex. The American Catholic Church looks liked a family where the parents see their children as infants, i.e., where every decision is a parental responsibility and the children have no say. Bishops are never required to seek advice from the people and the people cannot have any executive authority or any formal responsibility for leadership. Lay people are not the children of the bishop; they are the children of the Lord, and we are all in this together. In baptism we became a new creation and we share in the priesthood of Christ.

We believe that popes and bishops are guided by the Spirit in their teaching; and the whole faithful people is guided in its prayerful practice by exactly the same Spirit. It is the Church and not just the laity that has to grow up. God is not a neurotic parent who cannot abide the thought that the children will mature and stand on their own feet. There is no true love without freedom. The love that is constrained is not love. Growing up means growing more like God because it means growing in the capacity to love. The more we can love the more like God we are. But love requires freedom and responsibility. The freer and more responsible we are, the more like God we are.

At the heart of religion is the conviction that we are neither our own explanation nor our own reason for living. It follows that that accountability should permeate the practice of Christian living. If we owe all we have and are to something beyond ourselves, then we surely have a responsibility beyond ourselves. Accountability is the public face of responsibility, illustrated in our willingness to submit our actions to the judgment of others. It follows directly from the recognition that the human being is not in the first instance an individual equipped with inalienable rights, but rather a member of a community whose rights are proportionate to the rights of others.

Ideally, a family is a community marked by the unconditional love of its members for one another, in which this love is directed outward to the world that the family members will eventually make their own. Most families do not live up to these high ideals, but the fulfillment of these ideals is surely what families are for.

Depending on the level of maturity of a family member, the mixture of freedom and responsibility varies, but two characteristics are constant:

- All, including the most senior members of the family, are accountable to all the others.
- This accountability is not best understood as accountability of children to parents and parents to children, but rather as accountability of each member of the family understood as a whole.

There are at least three different senses of the term “accountability:”

- There is the very limited understanding of accountability as the obedience of those of lesser positions in the family or community to those with more senior or higher positions. This would be evident in the Victorian family where the *pater familias* is rarely seen, and then only to give orders.
- There is the “lower” accountability of all family or community members to one another. Here we are not talking about obedience, but about a sense of responsibility to and for one another.
- A higher accountability is the deeper mutuality and web of loving relationships that is consistent with the lower accountability and could not exist without it, but which goes far beyond it. Trust, love and mutuality in a successful family transcend even the genuinely reciprocal responsibility that marks the lower accountability. The model for this is the mutuality of God and Israel in the Hebrew covenant. There, God and Israel make promises to each other, but they are only the public face of an enduring love.

In the American Catholic church today accountability is primarily understood in the impoverished sense of obedience to higher authority. Accountability operates in only one direction. This could be fairly simply solved by instituting the kind of structures that most human communities would consider healthy; i.e., laypeople would periodically do performance reviews of their clergy, clergy of their bishops, and bishops of the pope. We would then be on the verge of commitment to a genuine application of lower accountability, but we would still be in danger of missing the deeper values.

Credibility is directly proportional to the practice of accountability. Credibility is something we acquire in the eyes of others through the transparency of our practice of accountability. Respect must be earned. It should never be extended to a person merely because of his or her status. Respect follows from the credibility that is based on the public practice of accountability. Any thing else simply enables dysfunctional behavior.

While the Catholic Church is devoted to a Trinitarian God, ironically, it is devoted to a hierarchical structure. Would not the ecclesial structure God would want for his Church follow more closely with God’s very nature? What would happen if we modeled the Church on the life of God instead of on the structures of the Roman Empire or Ford Motor Company? Would that not be a good thing? Vatican II intended to build a communion ecclesiology in this direction; yet so much in the Church remains hierarchical. When Vatican II made the hierarchical structure of the Church secondary

to understanding the church as the People of God, it took a giant step toward growing closer to God. Hierarchy does not reflect the divine life; mutuality does.

The inner life of the Trinity is the preeminent model for us of the higher accountability we believe is the real issue for the Church. The three persons of the Trinity do not have to explain their actions to one another. Their lower accountability is subsumed in the higher accountability of a relationship of total openness and perfect equality.

The everyday legalistic language about accountability certainly has its place, particularly after the fiasco of episcopal failures of leadership in the wake of the clerical sex abuse scandal. But in the end all this is not much more than nursery accountability:

- Do what you say you will do;
- Be responsible;
- Be ready to explain your actions;
- Take the consequences, etc.

It is not unimportant, but it is only the first step toward true adult accountability.

If the Church is truly to practice accountability in the fullest sense of the word, then both its polity and its culture must manifest total mutuality. While there is a hierarchical structure to clerical orders in the Church, indicating levels of responsibility to serve, it should never be interpreted in terms of power, still less of levels of holiness attached to levels of power, if the Church is truly to be the church of God. There are differences in the mission of people in the Church as they place their particular gifts at the service of the Church.

The problem of lack of accountability in the church is not that the appropriate two-way openness of a healthy institution is lacking – though this is lacking in the Church and it is something that needs to be addressed – but that the church has placed organizational paraphernalia ahead of a fundamental reality that is in constant danger of being forgotten. In the categories of personal and structural sin, when a bishop hides his personal failings behind the walls of clerical culture, he is guilty of personal sin. “this sin is enabled by the structural sin of clericalism. But this sin is in turn a product of profound theological amnesia, of a far greater sin in which pride, power and status have led the Church to often into the error of thinking that its hierarchical structure is its essence. The church’s essence, as Vatican II has taught us, is relationship, interrelatedness, or *communio*. *Lumen Gentium*’s chapter on the People of God, remember, comes before the chapter on the hierarchy. The way forward for the Church must then be to reform its structures so that it is clearly seen to be a community of complete accountability, closer in consequence to the Triune God whom it exists to serve.

If this is what the Church is called to be, then the Church must demonstrate the characteristics of an open society. But the institutions of the Catholic Church today perpetuate secrecy and seem incapable of seeing any virtue in a measure of democracy within the Church. The political structures of the Catholic Church remain a

curious blend of Roman imperial practices and the trappings of medieval monarchy. The virtues of the Enlightenment and of Modernity – justice, equality, free speech, and so on – are qualities that the Church had to learn from secular society, because it could not have found the resources itself to discover them. Truly, those virtues have been incorporated into much of the wise teaching that the Catholic Church has offered the world since Leo XIII but rarely, if ever, employed in the internal life of the Church.

With the involvement of large numbers of lay ministers in American communities of faith, there is vibrancy to the best of our parishes that the shortage of ordained ministers does not spoil. Indeed, this shortage of ordained ministers may be precisely what has reminded the Church of the apostolicity of the lay vocation. In the days of Arianism, many bishops weakened in their resolve and failed in their responsibility for leadership. The laity stepped in, not by assuming the leadership that the bishops had abandoned, but in maintaining the practice of their faith despite poor leadership. Today, the realities of *communio* are to be found in the religious life of the faith community. That *communio* often exists despite and not because of the leadership of the Church.

While the Church today is not openly dealing with heresy, it is in crisis. This crisis is occasioned by a fundamental misconception of what is central to the Church. Despite the rhetoric of communion ecclesiology that the teachings of Vatican II more or less mandated, the Roman restorationism of the last quarter of a century has returned us institutionally to where we were before Vatican II. That is a place in which the responsibility of the community to mirror the relationship of the divine life has been overwhelmed by the wholly human predilection for rules, regulations, buildings, status, power over others, secrecy, silence, ambition and expediency. None of this is from God. The Church thrives by sharing in the life of God through the body and blood of Christ, not through the dead stuff of institutional bureaucracy.

The scandal of clerical sexual abuse has reinvigorated calls in the American Catholic Church for greater democratization, especially for the lay voice in financial affairs, in pastoral councils, and in the selection of pastors and bishops. Debates over sexual ethics and bioethical concerns, over mandatory celibacy of the clergy and ordination of women testify to the same concerns. The institutional response to much, in not all, of this has been to label it “dissent,” and more conservative Catholics have declared these kinds of concerns to be *ipso facto* evidence of lack of fidelity to the Church.

The battlefield for accountability and adulthood starts, if it does not end, in the parish. Here the people have much more real power than the local bishop, and they must use it. Financial councils should exist in every parish, and the people cannot allow the pastor to sidestep or ignore them. Pastoral councils should be insisted upon. And when the pastor has decided, as not a few have done, to turn back the clock, he must simply be told by the lay leadership of the parish that this is plainly unacceptable. The issue here is not a matter of taste. Vatican II’s liturgical changes were intended to stress the fact that the liturgy is the work of the whole gathered community, not that of

the priest alone. Moreover, learning to respond this way is not a school of dissent but a school of accountability, for both people and pastor.

The debate over authority and democratization is not in the end about political structures in the institution, but about whether the Church is a divine or human reality. Of course, it is both human and divine, but the insistence on unthinking obedience to a hierarchical structured polity is the reduction of the church to a purely human reality. Liberals who stop at a simple critique of the dysfunctional elements of the present church structures are playing into the hands of the institution by accepting the rules of the game as the institution understand them. The truth is that good order in the Church is God-given, but it is a structure of openness, accountability patterned on the divine life, not on the pyramid of power that has bedeviled the Church since the Middle Ages.

Authority is a characteristic of the whole Church, insofar as it is holy, accountable, open, based on the pattern of the divine life. The mission of different individuals in the Church may express that authority of the whole Church in different ways, but it is in virtue of sharing in the authority of the whole church that a bishop or prophet can claim authority. This approach to authority lies behind the understanding of papal infallibility as the pope expressing what has always been the faith of the church, not deriving or determining interpretations of doctrine on his own authority. The collective authority of the bishops and the practical infallibility of the *sensus fidelium* are similarly envisaged.

The Church has lost authority in a world that needs it leadership so much, because it has lost credibility. And loss of credibility, in its turn, must be put down as a public failure to be a fully open, accountable community. What the world sees is inevitably the failures in lower accountability, with poor episcopal leadership in the clergy sex abuse scandal as the primary example in North America in recent times. In the 19th century, the racism of the American Catholic Church might have been the public face of lack of accountability. But we in the community of faith come to understand that such failures in accountability are attributed to our failures in that higher accountability. If we were ready to recognize that the life of the Church must seek to mirror the divine life, the lower accountability would mostly take care of itself. Until we take this step, we will continue to be embroiled in sterile debates about who is dissenting from what.

Tom Kyle

20070921

1/ Adapted from *Catholicism at the Crossroads*, Paul Lakeland, The Continuum International Publishing Group, NY, NY, © 2007 by Paul Lakeland.

Paul Lakeland holds the Aloysius P. Kelly, S.J. Chair in Catholic Studies at Fairfield University, Fairfield, CT. In his book he writes further about accountability and the laity.

Permission given by Paul Lakeland to use material.