NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Vatican II 'collegiality' remains roadmap for journey ahead

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Benedict Resigns

As the cardinals gather in discussions this week to determine the road ahead, I hope they stay focused on church governance as the key to moving forward.

It is widely understood that Vatican dysfunction has placed a heavy burden on the church and led to the burdens of which Emeritus Pope Benedict spoke before his retirement.

The Vatican is incapable of running the global church. But let's keep in mind it did not have to be this way ? and that our emeritus pope brought much of it on himself.

"My strengths, due to an advanced age, are no longer suited to an adequate exercise of the Petrine ministry," he told the world upon announcing his surprise resignation.

Few will find fault the honest recognition by the 85-year-old prelate that he was no longer up to the task of running the church.

The bishops at the Second Vatican Council attempted to decentralize church governance both to make it more effective and to return to more traditional models of preaching the Good News.

The re-introduction of episcopal shared authority, called "collegiality," was one of the crowning achievements of Vatican II. In this understanding, the local church is primary, the bishops join together, as the apostles once did, to share authority. The bishop of Rome remains as the sign of unity among them, not the absolute monarch of recent centuries past.

However, first as prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, and later as Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger turned against this important council breakthrough. Collegiality was an attempt by the council's bishops to unleash the firm hold the Roman Curia had on church governance for decades, if not centuries. Such governance might have worked once, but no longer as the church had grown into a global institution.

The model of 5,000 bishops reporting to one man no longer worked, they understood, in the 20th century.

At the heart of Vatican II debates was the central schema on the church. Within it, rests the council's support for the notion of collegiality: "Just as Peter belonged to the community of the Twelve, so the pope belongs to the college of bishops, regardless of the special role he fills, not outside but within the college."

In September 1964, during the third council session, a two-thirds majority passed the schema.

At the time the Ratzinger, a young theologian, was one of the most progressive thinkers at the council. He attended all four sessions, writing at the time that the notion of church consists of worshiping communities and is "built up from a community of bishops, adding this was "probably the central idea in the council's doctrine of

collegiality."

The council viewed the local bishop and the local faith community as primary. It also established a mechanism for carrying out what the bishops felt was a much needed decentralized model of church authority. In this light they created national conferences of bishops. They were to administer church matters, especially those dealing with matters effecting local church communities.

Ratzinger at the time wholeheartedly expressed support for collegiality as the framework for, in his words, the "long desired strengthening of episcopal power."

But he was later to make an about face, one that, ironically, appears to have led to our current over centralized, dysfunctional governance system, and, which seemed to eventually overwhelm him, leading in part to his resignation.

Some have said the young Ratzinger turned against Vatican II reforms as early as 1968 when he was a professor of theology in German and was unhinged by the riots of students through Europe.

By the time he was heading John Paul's doctrinal enforcement congregation he had already changed his mind on the importance of decentralized authority. When it came time for the U.S. bishops to work on drafts for their 1983 pastoral on peace Ratzinger insisted they first be cleared through his office, which made changes to their content and direction.

However, the clearest act of the Vatican dismantling of collegiality came in 1998 when Pope John Paul issued the apostolic letter *Apostolos suos*, which gutted the authority of all national bishops' conferences. From then on local bishops had given up the last vestiges of local authority. They had become agents for the Vatican and were no longer seen as bodies exercising authority in their own right--as Ratzinger had once thought--but as mere associations of individuals.

From then on a national conference opinion could only be offered if every single one of its members agreed with it. That effectively spelled the end of pastoral letters such as the peace pastoral and the 1986 U.S. bishops' pastoral on economic justice.

Ratzinger once wrote Vatican II represented "the awakening of the church." He called it "a spiritual awakening." He wrote that this awakening "was the great and irrevocable event of the council" and was "more important in many respects than the texts it passed."

Fast forward to this week: If the cardinals keep in mind what the once Vatican II spirit filled theologian, Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict, wrote then, they will be much better placed to choose a new leader who will implement much needed church governance reform.

Vatican II continues to live ? though currently buried -- in the documents and spirituality of that council and it continues to serve as a enlightening roadmap for the journey ahead.

Source URL (retrieved on *07/30/2014 - 02:33*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/vatican-ii-collegiality-remains-roadmap-journey-ahead