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Sacraments, ministry at heart of Cooke's 50 years of work

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Bernard Cooke
Appreciation

A recurring theme in the work of theologian Bernard Cooke [1], who wrote approximately 20 books and influenced hundreds if not thousands of students, was the sacramental life of the church.

He saw the church in a state of evolution, and -- in a foreshadowing of the current papacy -- questioned if the extravagance of the papacy contradicted the simplicity of Jesus' message.

Cooke, who died May 31 [2], was also a frequent contributor to *NCR.*

In conjunction with his 1994 book *Sacraments and Sacramentality*, Cooke wrote about the future of the sacraments [3] in the Catholic church for *NCR*.

Cooke began this 1995 series by acknowledging a growing fear that Catholic sacramental life is drifting toward a Christianity that "abandons the emphasis on ritual."

Despite sacramental rituals undergoing obvious changes, this liturgical progression had "introduced new life into what had often become routine religious services," Cooke wrote.

He called these periods of sacramental evolution "bright spots on the liturgical landscape." He wrote that they "are not spiritual hideaways, comfortably isolated from the concerns and needs of the surrounding world; instead, liturgical vitality seems to be closely interwoven with social concern."

Cooke commended the Catholic community for finding a respective balance between innovation and tradition. He argued that this balance is indicative of a shift in progressive thought.

"What is shifting is the presupposition of liturgy, our understanding of salvation, of grace, of God's action in human life, of sin and forgiveness, indeed of the very nature of Christianity," Cooke wrote.

He wrote that while Catholics in the pews may not be "reflectively aware" of these changes in spiritual understanding, parishioners "are quite aware that 'church' does not mean what it used to."

Cooke argued that the sacramental ritual was changing because more people were recognizing that the sacraments are not a ceremony being done to them or in front of them, but a ritual in which they are active participants.

According to Cooke, "sacraments are not something they (parishioners) 'receive'; rather, sacraments are actions they do, active professions of their faith."

Cooke theorized that once Catholics realize they are part of the sacrament, not just receiving it, that realization

will translate into acknowledging their power to join in shared ministry together. After each person recognizes his or her active role in receiving the Eucharist, Cooke theorized that a common consciousness will take shape outside the walls of the church.

"(The sacraments) have the power to form community, to give meaning to the life of individuals and groups, to provide structures that change as life changes and truly to speak the presence of God among us," Cooke wrote. "There is common awareness that the church is the people of God, that all the baptized, and not just the ordained, share in mission and ministry and therefore in responsibility for the church and the world."

In a series of articles, also published in 1995, Cooke championed Catholics, people united through baptism, to take responsibility for the future of their church and consider the influence of the pope in contemporary times.

As a veteran writer of religious issues, Cooke began his three-part dissection of the role of the papacy [4] by acknowledging that even starting this discussion may cause some people to charge him with "pope-bashing."

In an attempt to eradicate some initial aggressors, he explained that his support of the pope was not in conflict with this discussion, but rather, that the discussion itself is evidence of his support of the papal office.

"An honest examination of the papal role is itself a tribute to the papacy," Cooke wrote. "One does not concern oneself about things one does not cherish and think important."

He went on to reference recently published articles written by a number of leading theologians of ecclesiastical authority who all question the limits of the Vatican.

Cooke wrote that, "without stating it explicitly," these theologians "are suggesting that the key view of Vatican II regarding the collegiality of pope and bishops has yet to be absorbed in official thinking or honored in papal behavior."

According to Cooke, this detachment in the papal office makes some theologians question the pope's teaching authority in matters of ethical judgment. Questioning his ethical authority led Cooke to evaluate the uneasiness surrounding papal infallibility.

"Basic questions have arisen about applying the term 'infallible' to anything or anyone except God," Cooke wrote.

Beyond asking whether the pope is infallible, Cooke asked Catholic thinkers to "ask how much of the papal claims to authority and power are intrinsic to the nature of the church."

Cooke admitted that the questions he was posing are precarious to discuss but he believed the evolving Christian discipleship demands such questions be examined.

In the second of the three sections [5], Cooke wrote that the papacy's extravagance is in direct conflict with the simplistic message of Jesus.

He asked whether "the papacy reflects God's action in Christ" and implored Catholics to responsibly reconsider "the absoluteness with which we have endowed some institutions of the church."

To provide evidence that the papacy has strayed far beyond Jesus' original message, Cooke cited the Gospel scene of Jesus' temptation in the desert when he is asked to prove his messiahship by tempting God.

"Satan offers Jesus ultimate economic and political power, 'all the kingdoms of the earth,' as the path to saving humankind," Cooke wrote. "Jesus' refusal to bow to this worship of earthly power puts him squarely at odds

with our ordinary understanding and esteem of power."

In citing this biblical reference, Cooke questioned whether the papacy's actions reflect the true message of Christ. Furthermore, he reminded readers that Christ challenged the political and religious powers of his day and he suggested they follow in his path.

"In every age we must examine the inherited institutions by which we strive to be Christian," Cooke wrote. "In our day we have a special need to reconsider responsibly and fearlessly the absoluteness with which we have endowed some institutions of the church."

Cooke ended his three-part series [6] by discussing the "God-is-with-us" model. This model takes the notion of God residing "up in heaven," sending down messages of grace through a series of mediators, and replaces it with a horizontal model in which God is present all around us, in everything we do.

"God is not 'above,' " Cooke wrote. "God is with us, present to us in word and spirit."

Replacing the vertical interpretation of God with a horizontal one allows the church to view itself as "a discipleship of equals," according to Cooke.

Cooke wrote that alongside the continuity of the church's history, is a continuity of life -- a life that "is progressively moving history toward its eschatological destiny."

MORE

Full text of Bernard Cooke's analysis of sacraments [7]

Bernard Cooke's three-part examination of the role of the pope in contemporary times [4]

"Winds of Change bring a 'paradigm shift'; now faithful must speak up [8]," an essay by Bernard Cooke

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