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God-with-us calls for new type of papacy

Bernard Cooke | Jun. 17, 2013
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*[**Editor's note:**This story originally appeared in the Feb. 24, 1995, issue of NCR.Bernard Cooke[1], an educator who foresaw the need for well-formed lay theologians, died May 31, 2013, in San Antonio. He was 91.]*

(Third of three parts)

Theologian Bernard Cooke here begins a three-part examination of the role of the pope in contemporary times.

In Part 1[2], Cooke explains the need to ask basic questions about the nature and role of the papacy, based on growing knowledge of the historical Jesus.

In Part 2[3], Cooke considers the person and message of Jesus and his attitude toward power, and discusses the historical role of bishops in relation to the pope.

In Part 3[4], Cooke suggests that carefully considered change in Christianity's concept of the papacy holds the power to bring the church and humankind closer to realizing the reign of God.

If our growing knowledge of the historical Jesus of Nazareth demands a reexamination of Catholic understanding of the papacy, so too does the present context of the church's life, the "signs of the times."

While there is a basic continuity in the history of the church's doctrine, belief and structures, this is a continuity in life, life that is progressively moving history toward its eschatological destiny. But life demands change, not change that is blind and threatening but rather thought-through change, freely chosen because it promises to bring the church -- and humankind -- in a step further in the realization of God's reign.

In recent decades, we have become more conscious of how certain ways of thinking about human life, about the world and about God -- certain "models" -- control, define and limit not only our understandings but also the activity grounded in those understandings. One thing that has increased our awareness of these models has been the discovery of cultures other than our own, the discovery of how the world and human life have been and still are thought of quite differently by others. We have gradually accepted such cultural diversity as a good thing.

In our Europe-rooted thinking about the church, we have moved toward incorporating into the faith and life of the Christianity we have known the worldviews and cultural riches of peoples other than those of European origin. We have been scarcely aware that something much more radical is taking place, that Christ's Spirit is reinstituting the church through the poor of the earth.

All this has influenced our understanding of the history of Christianity. We are beginning to accept the fact that at any point in the past two millennia the structures of the church were what they were because of the cultural situations in which they emerged. So we have greater appreciation for the fact that as the papacy came into being, it was, at least to some degree, conceived and justified according to the prevalent governmental model of

monarchy.

As in Leviticus

These developments were also, in the well-known process of legitimation, justified by a somewhat legendary view of Christian origins. The Twelve Apostles were seen as the first bishops, commissioned as such by Jesus himself; Peter was seen as the first pope; the Last Supper was looked upon as the first Mass and the priestly ordination of the Twelve; and so on. Interestingly, much of the legitimation of ordained ministry's eminence in the life of the church came by reference not to the New Testament literature and the infant church that produced it, but by reference to the Jerusalem Temple priesthood as reflected in the Book of Leviticus.

History indicates, then, that the evolving structures of the church grew out of the understandings of Christianity that existed at any given time and place, grounded in those understandings even as they were also grounded in the guidance of Christ's Spirit.

Because that Spirit endows the Christian community with continuity in its faith and life, we must always be careful in our research and reflection that we respect and reinforce elements that are of the essence of the church. We must also remember that Christ's Spirit is a prophetic Spirit, moving us beyond where we now are into a fuller sharing in the new life that is our heritage.

So regarding the papacy, we must examine with care and openness the centuries-long development of that element of the church, searching with fidelity the God-given aspects of Roman primacy and honoring them with belief and support. But we cannot honestly avoid admitting the ways in which some of the understanding of the papal role, and consequently some of the exercise of power by popes, came into being from human cultural influences rather than as conclusions from the gospel of the risen Christ.

Ours is neither the world nor the church of Leo I, nor of Gregory the Great, much less of Hildebrand or Innocent III, nor of a papacy striving to regain its power after the Council of Constance, nor of the time of Trent or Pius IX or Pius X. Those were times with their own specific insights, fears and needs, times when the view of Christianity and of the structured church were shaped by cultural ferment within the European portion of the world.

This implies that as dedicated and mature Catholics cherish their history and the church that has grown out of that history, they must not grant to historical process an absoluteness that nothing human can possess. Fallibility is a characteristic of Christianity as it is of all human reality.

The civil power model

In thinking about the exercise of power in the church, especially as it touches the pope, we must be careful not to confine ourselves within the model of civil political power that has for centuries been assumed as a given. Even discussion of how to make the church "more democratic" needs to keep in mind that the basic issue is not that of the redistribution of power but of the very nature of the power that is to be shared and exercised within a community of faith and discipleship.

Such a reconsideration of power in the church in no way denies a lasting need for a papal primacy. Indeed, it may well open up a whole new vision of the manner in which the worldwide witness to truth, hope and compassion that has been strikingly exhibited by popes in the latter half of this century can provide leadership in a world that badly needs truth, hope and compassion.

Even as we rejoice in papal moral leadership, we cannot avoid questioning other exercise of papal power, exercise of power that involves domination, control, threat and claim to eminence beyond any judgment short of

God. God's Spirit does not work in this way. As an alternative, we can envisage a papal role as liaison among communities around the world with their diverse cultural insights into the gospel, with their differing cultural forms of sacramental liturgies, with their diverse patterns of Christian community.

Such a role could be one of encouraging creativity, of supporting careful attempts to make Christian ritual more meaningful for people, of listening to the many ways in which Christ's Spirit is leading us into a new world and then bearing witness to this presence of God in our midst. This role might at times involve judgment upon certain beliefs and practices that appear to endanger authentic faith, but it would not be judgment coming from the pope's own views alone but from a broader exercise of magisterium that draws from the Christian experience of dedicated believers worldwide. Such a bishop of Rome would not be a father figure, a Papa, but a brother with a distinctive and welcomed role within the family.

Beneath such suggestions lies the most radical shift in "model," a new insight into the way in which God is at work in our history, a model already evident at Vatican II. A breakthrough understanding of God's continuing presence to human life along with a new awareness of what Jesus' resurrection is all about is leading us to a radical reimaging of "salvation."

The God-with-us model

Instead of the up-and-down model in which God "up in heaven" sends down graces through a series of chosen mediators, we are moving toward the horizontal model of community. God is not "above"; God is with us, present to us in word and Spirit. Jesus did not leave the world in his resurrection; Jesus in resurrection became the Christ dwelling "until the end of the world" with those who in faith and hope accept the redeeming truth that unending life comes from the cross.

In a church viewed this way there is a discipleship of equals, no one is placed "over" others, though there is obvious need for various roles. There will always be need for governing, for direction of communities and of the overall communio of these communities, but this will be the charismatic governing of which St. Paul speaks, a governing that leads free people to truth, hope and love.

Such governing will recognize that Christ's Spirit works in all the faithful, that the challenge of certain prophetic figures in the church -- or for that matter outside the church -- is a gift of God to be listened to with discerning openness, that accurate and authentic faith is not a monopoly of any group or individual in the church.

Because much of the present tension about the pope's role has to do with his teaching authoritatively, a final basic question needs to be raised, a question whose relevance extends beyond the papacy. Briefly put, does possession of an office, such as bishop or pope, bestow knowledge on the officeholder? When, for instance, a person becomes pope, does he at that point possess understanding of the faith -- to say nothing of understanding other matters -- he did not previously have?

It seems to me that there is an undeniable tradition that a special charism belongs to the church of Rome and its bishop, and with that a distinctive responsibility to nurture the faith of the entire church. I think we still need to discover exactly what that charism is, what that responsibility is.

Bernard Cooke teaches theology at Incarnate Word College in San Antonio, Texas. His most recent book is God's Beloved (Trinity Press).

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