

# Towards a More Democratised Church<sup>1</sup>

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## 1 Introduction

As argued in my previous articles,<sup>2</sup> there are various elements in the Church's past and present that can be described as democratic. However, when one speaks of democracy in the Church, very often one meets a chorus of objections. In this article I am going to discuss the main arguments brought against the idea of democracy in the Church.<sup>3</sup> I will then outline my arguments in favour of greater Church democratisation and make some proposals as to how this can be achieved faithful to the true spirit of the gospel.

## 2 Arguments against Church democratisation

There are, in my view, four main arguments that are brought up against the idea of Church democratisation. The first argument draws on the fundamental truth that ultimate authority in the Church resides in Christ; here it is argued that democracy in the Church goes against this authority from on high. The second is based on the understanding that Christ founded an essentially hierarchical Church; and a hierarchical system, it is claimed, is in itself non-democratic. The next argument, then, is founded on the basic tenet that truth can never depend on numbers; while the last one is based on the pneumatological vision of the Church that sees charisms exclusively as imparted freely by the Spirit and in no way subdued to control from below.

### 2.1 Ultimate authority in the Church resides in Christ

As indicated above, the first argument against Church democratisation is built on

1. This is the fourth and last in a series of articles on the Catholic Church and democracy. Bible quotations are from the New Jerusalem Bible. Unless otherwise stated, quotations from official Church documents are taken from the English translation available at the official Vatican website ([www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)), and those from the Fathers of the Church are taken from the *New Advent Catholic website* ([www.newadvent.org/fathers](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers)).
2. DAVID POLIDANO, *Democratic Elements in the Early Church*, in *Melita Theologica* 55 (2004), 27–48; *Elements of Democracy in the Church: Vatican ii and afterwards*, in *Melita Theologica* 55 (2004), 109–129.
3. By the word “democracy” I am here understanding the concept of democracy as a vision based on the values of equality and liberty as promoted by the Church especially during the pontificate of John Paul II and as elaborated in my article *The Catholic Church and Democracy*, in *Melita Theologica* 54 (2003), 145–158.

the Lordship of Christ in the Church. There is for Christians only one Lord, Jesus Christ. In the Church the source of all power and authority is Christ. The Church is, therefore, to use Karl Barth's slogan, "not a democracy but a Christocracy."<sup>4</sup>

Two main points are here relevant. First of all, to say that the Church is not a democracy is not to say that the Church should not become more democratic. In the same vein, it can be said that the Church is not a monarchy, but it did become more and more monarchic as first mono-episcopacy and then papal supremacy (rather than primacy) developed in Church history. Government in human institutions, including the Church, can be more or less monarchic, more or less democratic, and so on. The Church has had periods in her history that can be called more democratic as she has had periods that were definitely more monarchic. It could be the time for the Church to become more democratic at a stage in history where "Christians are in the presence of a characteristic 'sign of the times', constituted by the request for participation and co-responsibility which characterizes the majority of contemporary cultures."<sup>5</sup>

The second point is that the fact that Christ is the only true Lord in the Church does not a priori exclude democratic government or elements thereof within the Church. Official Catholic teaching has always held that even secular power ultimately derives from God. Pope John XXIII insisted in *Pacem in terris* that governmental authority "is a postulate of the moral order and derives from God."<sup>6</sup> However, he immediately clarified that

The fact that authority comes from God does not mean that men have no power to choose those who are to rule the State, or to decide upon the type of government they want, and determine the procedure and limitations of

4. See MIROSLAV VOLF, *Democracy and charisma: reflections on the democratisation of the Church*, in *The tabu of democracy within the Church*, edited by James Provost – Knut Walf (= *Concilium* 1992/5), London 1992, 114. The inter-dicasterial document *On the collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in the sacred ministry of priest* states that "every particular Church owes its guidance to Christ since it was He who fundamentally linked apostolic mission to the Church and hence no community has the power to grant that mission to itself or to delegate it," CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY et al., *On the collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in the sacred ministry of priest*, Theological principles 3.
5. GIUSEPPE ALBERIGO, *Ecclesiology and democracy: convergences and divergences*, in *The tabu of democracy within the Church*, 21.
6. POPE JOHN XXIII, *Pacem in terris*, 51.

rulers in the exercise of their authority. Hence the above teaching is consonant with any genuinely democratic form of government.<sup>7</sup>

To say that Christ is the Lord in the Church and that all power and authority rests in him does not necessarily imply that the faithful should have no say in the choice of those who are to rule the Church in Christ's name. Nor does it imply that they cannot participate in making decisions that will affect their life as members of the Church of Christ. The argument against Church democratisation built upon the contraposition of Christ and the people is fundamentally flawed. It assumes that the question is about whether it is Christ or the people who should govern in the Church. But, in actual fact, the question is another. It regards how Christ can and wants to govern his Church.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.2 *Christ instituted a hierarchically organised Church*

Another argument against Church democratisation, often linked with the first, is that Christ instituted the Church specifically as a hierarchical structure: the Church's hierarchical structure is divinely willed and therefore unchangeable.<sup>9</sup> Being a hierarchy, the argument goes, the Church can never be a democracy. Moreover, the introduction (or, I would say, recuperation) of democratic elements in the Church is seen as an undermining factor to the Church's hierarchical nature.<sup>10</sup>

Here again, it is to be remarked that the contraposition of hierarchy and democracy as two mutually exclusive modes of government is not acceptable.<sup>11</sup> One can envisage the form of government in the Church as if on a continuum, being more or less hierarchic and conversely less or more democratic. Hierarchic elements that are

7. Ibid., 52.

8. See VOLFF, 114–115.

9. The directory *On the ministry and life of priests* condemns what it calls “democratism” in the Church (or the belief that the mentality and current practice in cultural and social-political trends of our times can be transferred automatically to the Church) because “it leads to a denial of the authority and capital grace of Christ and to distort the nature of the Church; it would be almost just a human society. Such a view damages the very hierarchical structure willed by its Divine Founder as the Magisterium has always clearly taught and the Church herself has lived from the start.” CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, *On the ministry and life of priests*, 17.

10. According to Edward Schillebeeckx, the ‘hierarchy’ argument is the one used in official Church documents specifically to reject any democratic exercise of authority and thus the democratic participation by the faithful in Church government. See EDWARD SCHILLEBEECKX, *Church. The human story of God*, London 1990, 217.

11. See *Editorjal. Hemm post ghad-demokrazija fil-Knisja?*, in *Pastor* 31 (2000) 3.

deemed divinely instituted, like, for example, the leadership role assigned to the Twelve and their successors, and particularly to Peter and his successors, can be maintained while democratic elements, like the participation of the faithful in the election of these leaders, can be introduced or reintroduced. The democratic vision and democratic structures can be introduced in the Church “as a complement to hierarchy, in the service of community.”<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, historico-critical analysis suggests that much in the present hierarchical structure of the Church does not go back to the historical Jesus, but is a much later development inspired by the social status symbols of the Graeco-Roman empire and further influenced by the Neoplatonic works of pseudo-Dionysius.<sup>13</sup> Along history, the Church’s hierarchical structure continued to take over more *and more elements* from the non-democratic cultures surrounding her, particularly feudalism and the absolute monarchy. To say that the present hierarchical structure of the Church is completely unchangeable and can admit of no democratisation is historically and theologically untenable. Rather, there should be a constant unceasing self-evaluation in the Church as to how she can be, in response to the signs of the times, ever more faithful to the Word of God, which is ultimately under no one’s sovereign control, neither that of the hierarchy nor that of the community of the believers as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

### ***2.3 Truth is a gift from God not subject to the will of the majority***

The third argument against Church democratisation is based on the principle that truth comes from God and can never depend on the will of the majority.

In his speech to the Austrian episcopal conference on its *ad limina* visit in November 1998, Pope John Paul II, wary of the democratising tendencies thriving in the Austrian church,<sup>15</sup> warned that

12. OWEN O’SULLIVAN, *The silent schism. Renewal of Catholic spirit and structures*, Dublin 1997, 35.

13. See SCHILLEBEECKX, *Church. The human story of God*, 216–217.

14. See *Ibid.*, 219.

15. The *ad limina* visit of the Austrian bishops followed immediately the conclusion of an assembly of laity, priests, and bishops in Salzburg, which saw the approval by a majority of various requests, including access of women and married men to ordination, greater freedom for married couples in birth regulation, and greater involvement of the local churches in the nomination of their bishops.

No ‘base’ can determine revealed truth. Truth is not produced by a ‘church from below’, but comes from ‘on high’, from God. Truth is not a human creation, but a gift from heaven. The Lord himself entrusted it to us, the successors of the apostles, so that — endowed with ‘a sure charism of truth’ — we might transmit it intact, guard it jealously and explain it faithfully.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, truth belongs only to God and we partake in it inasmuch as God in his gracious love reveals it to us. No one on earth can claim to **determine** the truth and this holds not only for the ‘base’ as remarked by the pope, but also for the hierarchy and even for the Church as a whole. If by Church democratisation one intends a system wherein “revealed truth can be determined by popular surveys and decided democratically,”<sup>17</sup> then one would be proposing something definitely at odds with the Gospel and its revealed truth. But, if by Church democratisation one intends, as I do, a vision and a way of life in the Church wherein all the baptised are involved in the common effort, not against but together with their leaders, to discover the implications of revealed truth in the context of the present signs of the times, then the argument that truth is the gift of God “from above” does not per se exclude democratisation.

Undeniably, the proper rights and obligations of the different offices in the Church should be respected and it should be recognised by all that the right and obligation to “transmit [truth] intact [and] guard it jealously” does indeed belong especially to those recognised in a distinctive way as the successors of the apostles. But it should also be realised by all that ultimately this is the right and obligation of the Church as a whole — apostolicity is after all the characteristic of the whole ecclesial body. In his famous *Rambler* article of July 1859, John Henry Newman showed how the history of the Arian heresy between Nicaea and Constantinople I demonstrates that it was the belief of the body of the laity, faithful to its baptism, which saw the Church through a crisis that had tainted most of the episcopal body, patriarchs, and at one time even the pope.<sup>18</sup> As he pointed out, even if some of its leaders fell into heresy, the Holy Spirit, who is guiding the Church, would never leave the whole body of the faithful go astray.

16. POPE JOHN PAUL II, Address *Your task as bishops is to preach the truth that comes from above* (20 November 1998) 11: *Catholic information network* (on-line) : <http://www.cin.org/jp2/jp981120.html> [8 August 2001].

17. *Ibid.*, 11.

18. See JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, *On consulting the faithful in matters of doctrine*, in *Modern history sourcebook* (on-line) : <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/newman-faithful.html> [26 February 2001].

The contribution of all the levels of the faithful to the defence and transmission of the deposit of the faith and to its application to Church life is attested to by the participation not only of bishops and clergy, but also of the laity, in local and regional synods like those convoked by Cyprian of Carthage in the third century.<sup>19</sup> The increased attention given, in the aftermath of Vatican II, to particular councils and diocesan synods with the participation of the different sections of the people of God is a positive step in the recuperation of what in practice had become an almost lost tradition.

#### ***2.4 The free impartation of charisms by the Spirit***

In the speech quoted in the previous subsection, John Paul II spoke of the “sure charism of truth” given to the successors of the apostles enabling them to transmit, guard, and explain the revealed deposit of faith. The fourth argument sometimes brought up in the debate about Church democratisation is that in the Church, charisms are imparted freely by the Spirit and in no way can these be subdued to control from below.

In 1970, Joseph Ratzinger, while favouring the introduction into the Church of democratic elements like a limited participation of the community in the selection of its leaders,<sup>20</sup> ruled out any connection between the nature of the Church as a charismatic community and the discussion about her democratisation. He insisted that as a pneumatological principle, charism is the expression of an authority from above over which the community has no control; it is not the materialisation of an authority from below in which all might share.<sup>21</sup>

However, a biblically based understanding of the concept of charisms implies not only the conviction that they are spiritual gifts from above which Christians should eagerly desire (1 Co 14, 1), but also the persuasion that they are received to be utilised for the building up of the community (1 Co 14, 12). If charisms are given

19. See LEONARD SWIDLER, *Dēmo-kratía, the rule of the people of God, or consensus fidelium*, in *Authority in the Church*, (edited by Piet F. Franssen) (= *Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia* 26), Leuven 1983, 234.

20. See JOSEPH RATZINGER, *Democratizzazione della chiesa?*, in Joseph Ratzinger & Hans Maier, *Democrazia nella Chiesa. Possibilità, limiti, pericoli* (= *punti scottanti di teologia* 23), Roma 1971, 48–50.

21. See *Ibid.*, 29–30.

by the Spirit for the good of the community, then the person desiring or utilising such charisms needs to take into account the actual needs of the community. This has led Evangelical theologian Miroslav Volf to speak of the “interactional model of the impartation of charisms.”<sup>22</sup> Charisms are certainly imparted freely by the Spirit, but only to people in concrete and particular social settings; “the manner in which charisms are imparted is essentially communal.”<sup>23</sup>

Precisely as the gifts of the Spirit, charisms are given in the process of interaction between the charismatic individual and the church. Charisms are always partly conditioned by a concrete church in which a person lives (although they are not *given* by the church). For this reason a church can implicitly or explicitly decide about the presence of charisms in its individual members. To have charisms and to serve with charisms is essentially an *open ecclesial process*. ... Charisms are not only compatible with ecclesial ‘democracy’; they seem to presuppose at least some form of implicit ‘democracy’.<sup>24</sup>

### ***3 Theological reasons in favour of Church democratisation***

In this section I will now turn to the consideration of four theological arguments in favour of greater democracy in the Church. The first argument is based on the basic equality of all the baptised, the second on the concept of authority as true service, the third on the essential mission of the Church to be true witness of the values of the Gospel, and, finally, the fourth is based on the call of all the baptised to grow into responsible and mature Christians.

#### ***3.1 All equally children of God***

Basic to the Judeo-Christian tradition is the anthropological and theological statement that human beings have been created in the image of God. Moreover, this vision has been further enriched in Christianity by the belief that the Son of God, through his incarnation, death, and resurrection, has enabled us human beings to become children of God. Respect for the dignity of each and every human being is central to the Christian faith.

22. VOLF, 117.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., 117–118.

In democracy, one of the two main pillars is **equality of respect**, that is to say the equal respect due to each and every human person.<sup>25</sup> This implies that in true democracy, anything that conflicts with the respect due to each and every moral agent, that is, anything which infringes upon the fundamental rights of individuals or groups of individuals, should not be allowed. Democracy is indeed a vision that implies and at the same time fosters the inviolability and the protection of the fundamental human rights based on the dignity of the human person. Therefore, as Owen O’Sullivan observes, “on the matter of respect for the person there is a deep spiritual affinity between the spirit of democracy and the Christian faith.”<sup>26</sup>

When decisions, even good ones, are taken in the Church, or elsewhere, by a paternalistic, omniscient authority without due involvement of the people who will be actually affected by those decisions, the implicit message is that the people’s opinions are not being valued, that people themselves are not being valued.<sup>27</sup> When projects are valued more than persons, or efficiency more than relationships, then people are being devalued.<sup>28</sup> In the Gospel according to Matthew we find a stern admonition against this kind of paternalistic authority that undermines true equality and fraternity: “You, however, must not allow yourselves to be called Rabbi, since you have only one Master, and you are all brothers. You must call no one on earth your father, since you have only one Father, and he is in heaven” (Mt 23, 8–9).<sup>29</sup>

If we truly want to have a Church that is a communion (*koinonia*) of equal but different members, all with their own different charism and corresponding ministry, but each sharing the same dignity that belongs to all the children of God, we must strive to do away with that kind of authority where control is exercised from above and seek to develop forms of authority where control is circular and structurally reciprocal.<sup>30</sup> Authority in the Church is ultimately Christ’s and through the gifts of

25. See DAVID POLIDANO, *Democracy in the Church*, unpublished Master of Arts in Theology and Human Studies Dissertation, Faculty of Theology, University of Malta, Malta 2001, 28–32.

26. O’SULLIVAN, 60. See also ALBERIGO, 17.

27. Hans Küng opines that the exclusion from true decision-making relegates the excluded to the status of “second-class members” of the Church. Hans Küng, *Participation of the laity in Church leadership and in Church elections, in A democratic Catholic Church. A Reconstruction of Roman Catholicism*, edited by Eugene C. Bianchi & Rosemary Radford Ruether, New York 1993, 80.

28. See O’SULLIVAN, 56; 69–70.

29. See also RUDOLF PESCH, *The New Testament foundations of a democratic form of life in the Church, in Democratization of the Church*, edited by Aloise Müller (= *Concilium* 3/7), London 1971, 52–53.

30. See ALBERIGO, 20. Alberigo refers to the ancient practice of *correctio fraterna* as a historical example of a structurally reciprocal form of control in the Church.



the Spirit he shares it with all the baptised.<sup>31</sup> All this demands that the involvement of Church members should be promoted, not only on a consultative basis but also on the level of effective decision-making.<sup>32</sup>

### 3.2 *Authority as true service*

Jesus envisaged authority among his disciples as a service of love towards the other.<sup>33</sup> The issue here is about which kind of authority best lends itself to this Gospel ideal of authority/service. A couple of questions can help in the reflection.

First, as Edmund Hill has asked,<sup>34</sup> would a servant do what he just believes or thinks is in the interest of his master, or would he first seek to discover what his master's wishes and needs really are and act accordingly? Though some intuition and intelligent creative thinking on the part of servants should be welcomed, they are expected to ask, and to listen carefully when they are told what their master wants. Secondly, is it servants who choose their masters, or masters who choose their servants? Though in today's Western culture we look at servants as employees who enter service, and leave it, freely, the final decision in the deal has always belonged to the masters.

If Church leaders want to exercise authority according to the vision set by Jesus in the Gospels, furthering democratisation in the Church would be of big aid. Those who are ready to give themselves in all sincerity to the service of the faithful as Church leaders "should not be afraid to commit themselves by an unambiguous assent to accepting ways in which others can play a responsible part in the taking of decisions."<sup>35</sup> Worldwide, democracy has led to the development of "a variety of constitutional mechanisms by which governors are both chosen by the governed, and obliged to consult them and ask them what they think their interests are."<sup>36</sup> The

31. See POLIDANO, *Democratic Elements in the Early Church*, 32–34.

32. See 4.2 Participation in the decision-making, *infra*.

33. See POLIDANO, *Democratic elements in the early Church*, 30–31

34. See EDMUND HILL, *What does the New Testament say?* in *Priests and people* 11 (1997) 312.

35. KARL LEHMANN, *On the dogmatic justification for a process of democratisation in the Church*, in *Democratisation of the Church*, 71. Lehmann goes on to explain that "this is still not to exclude the exercise of a veto in decisions of principle when there are good reasons for this." The application of such a veto should, however, only follow upon a thorough soul-searching exercise on the part of the Church leader to see whether his position truly reflects the will of God or just his own. See *Ibid.*, 83.

36. HILL, 312–313.

incorporation of more democratic elements in Church government would certainly facilitate the elimination from the Church of any exercise of authority as “lording it over”, promoting instead authority/service.

As the former Dominican master general Vincent de Couesnongle observed about the foundation of the Order of Preachers, for it to be in line with the Gospel “recourse was had to certain structures which, in political science, are called democratic, where sovereignty belongs to the whole group of citizens.”<sup>37</sup> Likewise, a Catholic Church that wants today to be truly faithful to the Gospel vision of a community of equal brothers and sisters mutually serving each other in love, should not fear to change her structures to be able to live better up to the ideals of this vision. As Karl Lehmann asked way back in 1971, “Why do we not already take it completely for granted that much in the style and forms of the Church should be ‘democratic’?”<sup>38</sup>

### 3.3 *Salt of the earth, light of the world*

The Church exists not so much for her own self, but to be the sacrament in Christ to the world, “a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.”<sup>39</sup> All discussion about Church structures and institutions has therefore to be considered in view not only or primarily of the Church in herself, but in view of the Church’s main end: the proclamation of the Gospel to all nations.<sup>40</sup> So, the question here would be whether or not a more democratised Church would in effect facilitate the Church’s mission to preach the Gospel and to be truly “salt for the earth” and “light for the world” (Mt 5, 13. 14).

The world “would listen more closely to what the Church says if she — the Church — were seen to apply her teaching fully in her own internal life.”<sup>41</sup> This was clearly understood by the 1971 Synod of bishops, which in its final document, *Justice in the world*, declared that

37. VINCENT DE COUESNONGLE, *Confidence for the future*, Dublin 1982, 112, quoted in PATRICIA WALTER, *Democracy in Dominican government*, in *The tabu of democracy within the Church*, 63.
38. LEHMANN, 84. Lehmann puts the word democracy within quotes as he refers to the conception of the term as developed earlier in his article, that is democracy as primarily a form of life (rather than a simply formal concept) based on certain fundamental anthropological and ethical substructures. See *Ibid.*, 61–66.
39. VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Lumen gentium*, 1.
40. See JOSEPH RATZINGER, *Democratizzazione della chiesa?*, 20–21.
41. O’SULLIVAN, 93.

While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes. Hence we must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and of the possessions and life style found within the Church herself.”<sup>42</sup>

One may therefore argue that if the Church truly wants to persuade the world to employ, for the sake of justice, a proper vision of democracy based on true freedom and equality, and on the protection and the promotion of fundamental human rights, then the Church should herself espouse a more democratic form of life in accordance with the basic tenets of the Gospel. In doing this the Church can indeed learn from secular models, but she should as well be the lamp “on the lamp-stand” (Mt 5, 15) as she goes beyond ‘democratic’ appearances and procedures, giving instead primacy to the diaconal dimension promoted in the Gospels.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, as Karl Lehmann once wrote,

Nowhere are freedom, partnership, brotherhood, and mutual service, considered as the necessary prior conditions for any co-existence, ... more plainly evident than in a Church brought together by God’s sovereign grace into a ‘communion of saints’. The common state of being-in-Christ (‘*Christus totus*’) is the basis in life for this ‘democratic’ existence.<sup>44</sup>

### 3.4 Creative liberty and moral responsibility

In *Gaudium et spes*, Vatican II spoke of a mounting increase in the sense of autonomy as well as of responsibility in the people of the various nations and saw this as “of paramount importance for the spiritual and moral maturity of the human race.”<sup>45</sup> In effect, there can be no spiritual and moral maturity where there is no true freedom and responsibility. Christian morality consists basically in our personal

42. SYNOD OF BISHOPS, Final Report *Justice in the world* (30 November 1971), 40 : *Office for social justice* (on-line) : <http://www.osjspm.org/cst/jw.htm> [7 July 2001].

43. According to Rudolf Pesch, “a better way of expressing the ‘democratic’ form of life in the Church that is so necessary today would be perhaps a ‘diaconally democratic’ form of life.” Pesch, 55–56.

44. LEHMANN, 68–69.

45. VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Gaudium et spes*, 55. *Dignitatis humanae*, too, speaks of the demand “that men should act on their own judgment, enjoying and making use of a responsible freedom” and declares that it is “greatly in accord with truth and justice.” VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Dignitatis humanae*, 1.

and interiorised free response, in community with fellow human beings, to God's loving grace. Bernard Häring called this "creative co-responsibility."<sup>46</sup>

Moral autonomy (understood as the freedom to make decisions on one's moral principles, following a process of deliberation, scrutiny, and consideration) is needed for human beings to be fully human. Contrasting democracy with hierarchy,<sup>47</sup> Robert A. Dahl states that "only the democratic vision can offer hope ... that by engaging in governing themselves, all people, and not merely a few, may learn to act as morally responsible human beings."<sup>48</sup> Just as paternalism in individual decisions hinders the development of the individual's moral capacities, so too guardianship in public affairs "will stunt the development of the moral capacities of an entire people."<sup>49</sup>

The greater the importance given to the hierarchical aspect of the Church, the more the emphasis will be on centralism, on conformity, on paternalism, and on control. Consequently there will be less space for creative co-responsibility to God.

Where, on the contrary, the Church is understood, above all, as a *koinonia*, as a "fellowship in the Holy Spirit", and where this kind of self-understanding takes hold of people's minds and of the whole evangelisation, worship, and style of government, there will prevail collegiality, subsidiarity, and special appreciation of the charisms of the Holy Spirit who works in all, through all, and for all. There the sphere of creative liberty and fidelity will grow.<sup>50</sup>

The more the values of freedom and equality — values that are essentially evangelical, or at least can and should be understood according to their evangelical meaning — imbue the Church's self-understanding and her structures, the more and the better will individuals in the Church (personally and in communion with others) be able to give their free and creative response to God's love. In a more democratised Church, where subsidiarity rather than centralism prevails, moral responsibility is

46. See Bernard HÄRING, *Free and faithful in Christ. Moral theology for priests and laity*, in *General Moral Theology*, Slough 1985, 62–80.

47. Dahl distinguishes hierarchical rule by two tests: (i) non-leaders cannot peacefully displace leaders after explicit or implicit voting, and (ii) leaders substantially decide when, in what conditions, and with whom consultation takes place. The main justification of hierarchical rule is the idea of guardianship. See ROBERT A. DAHL, *Democracy and its critics*, New Haven/ct 1989, 52.

48. *Ibid.*, 79.

49. *Ibid.*, 78–79.

50. Häring, 80.

fostered as people responsible to make decisions and take actions do so themselves rather than turn to superior authorities in the quest to avoid the burden of their responsibilities.<sup>51</sup> It can be argued, therefore, that a more democratised Church will enable her faithful to be more fully human as well as more fully Christians who as such have “an established inalienable responsibility for the whole.”<sup>52</sup> A more democratised Church would empower them to act in true freedom according to their vocation as free and responsible sons and daughters of God in Christ.

#### ***4 Proposals for a more democratised Church***

Although it should be clear that democracy is primarily a vision based on freedom and equality, it must be stressed also that democracy needs to assume institutional forms in order for it to be effective. What follow in this section are some proposals in this regard.

##### ***4.1 A fuller application of the principle of subsidiarity in the Church***

One of the main tenets advocated by the Church in her social teaching is the principle of subsidiarity. This principle has important political connotations for the state and society and is being ever more recognised as fundamental to true democracy. First formulated in Catholic official teaching by Pope Pius XI, it was considered applicable to the Church by his successor Pius XII.<sup>53</sup> The importance

51. James Provost points this out with regard to the office of the local bishop: “The bishop has all the power to exercise his pastoral office. There is no need, nor is it appropriate, to refer matters to a higher authority which properly pertain to the diocesan bishop as vicar and ambassador of Christ in the particular church. Failure to use power may not only be irresponsible, but damaging for the welfare of all the Church,” JAMES H. PROVOST, *Canonical reflection on selected issues in diocesan governance*, in *The ministry of governance*, edited by James K. Mallett (= *With oars and sails* 1), Washington/dc 1989, 249.

52. KÜNG, 83.

53. Pius XII stated twice that the principle of subsidiarity is applicable to the Church itself. Speaking to the college of cardinals in 1946, Pius, after quoting *Quadragesimo anno* 79, said: “Parole veramente luminose, che valgono per la vita sociale in tutti i suoi gradi, ed anche per la vita della Chiesa, senza pregiudizio della sua struttura gerarchica.” In 1957, in his address to the second world congress of the lay apostolate, Pius spoke of the Church as not being a goal in itself and that, just like other associations, it exists in service of the individual members. Lay persons have the right to receive spiritual goods in their quest for fulfilment as Christians and they can take on their responsibility as inviolable images of God, proud of their personal dignity and their healthy sense of freedom. See AD LEYS, *Ecclesiological impacts of the principle of subsidiarity* (= *Kerken Theologie in Context* 28), 86–88.

of the principle of subsidiarity for the Church was highlighted in the principles approved by the 1967 synod of bishops to guide the revision of the code of canon law, and this especially, but not solely,<sup>54</sup> with regard to the governmental structure of the Church, something that Pius XII had not yet thought of (Pius had primarily spoken about the consequences of the principle on the recognition of the status of individual believers in the Church and the role of the Church to help where individuals cannot cope by themselves).<sup>55</sup> The 1969 extraordinary synod confirmed the thesis that the competency of local bishops, either individually or grouped with others in episcopal conferences, and that of the pope should be governed by the principle of subsidiarity.<sup>56</sup>

The preface to the *Code of canon law* of 1983 professes that it had been guided by the principles approved by the 1967 synod. It can therefore be presumed that "careful attention" was given "to the greater application of the so-called principle of subsidiarity within the Church." Nevertheless, the quality of the outcome of this "careful attention" has been put into question,<sup>57</sup> especially when one considers that in 1985 the extraordinary synod of bishops recommended in its final report "that a study be made to examine whether the principle of subsidiarity in use in human society can be applied to the Church, and to what degree and in what sense such an application can and should be made."<sup>58</sup> This statement manifests both the uncertainty as to how much and how properly the principle had been hitherto applied in the Church as well as the relatively novel doubt whether it is applicable at all.

54. The sixth principle, albeit without any explicit mention of the principle of subsidiarity, "confirmed that a presupposition which is important for the principle is valid also in the Church. The rights of the faithful which are contained in natural as well as in divine-positive law, as also the rights which are derived from these, must be recognised and protected," *Ibid.*, 92.

55. See *Ibid.*, 89–93.

56. See *Ibid.*, 93–96.

57. Ad Leys contends that the code erroneously identifies the principle of subsidiarity with decentralisation. According to Leys, in decentralisation the position of the highest authority (the centre) prevails and authority is given to the periphery as a concession; according to the principle of subsidiarity the smaller groups or the individuals' authority should be recognised as coming from an original right. See *Ibid.*, 98. Besides, Leys also points out that the sixth and seventh principles approved by the synod (these demanded the protection of rights of persons whether these originate from natural law or from divine positive law, a juridical statute for all the faithful together, and the development of an administrative justice system) have been summarised in the preface to the code in a very unsatisfactory manner and have found a very minimal realisation in the code itself. See *Ibid.*, 197.

58. SECOND EXTRAORDINARY SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *The Church*, II C, 8c.

The problem of the scope of the applicability of the principle emerges to some extent in the *motu proprio* of 1998 on episcopal conferences. Without mentioning subsidiarity as such, *Apostolos suos* applies the principle with regard to the relationship between episcopal conferences and diocesan bishops when it insists that excessive bureaucracy operating between the plenary sessions of the conferences should be avoided. “The essential fact must be kept in mind that the episcopal conferences with their commissions and offices exist to be of help to the bishops and not to substitute for them.”<sup>59</sup> The principle, however, does not seem to be deemed applicable in a similar fashion to the relationship between the Apostolic See and episcopal conferences. It is, for example, up to the Holy See to approve or not a doctrinal declaration made by a conference when there is no absolute unanimity among the bishops of that conference.

The vision of the Church as communion, which the 1985 extraordinary synod called “the central and fundamental idea of the council’s documents,”<sup>60</sup> has two basic elements: communion with God, through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit, and communion of the faithful among themselves. Communion among the members themselves is best understood in the light of the perfect communion that exists in the Holy Trinity. “In that *communio* there is unity as well as multiplicity, there is community as well as person, there is intense communication as well as personal individuality.”<sup>61</sup> The Church as communion is both an invisible divine mystery and a concrete human reality. Ad Leys adopts the christological dogma of the council of Chalcedon (451) as the hermeneutical point of reference for understanding the Church:

Incarnation means that the divine element does not deny the human element but preserves it intact and brings it to fulfilment. That is why all socio-ethical principles are valid for the Church too. That is certainly true for the principle of subsidiarity...<sup>62</sup>

59. POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Apostolos suos*, 18.

60. SECOND EXTRAORDINARY SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *The Church*, II C, 1. This statement of the synod “appears to be true and untrue at the same time. It is untrue because the texts and the first commentaries do not speak about *communio* in this way. It is true because *communio* does play a central role in the important chapter III of *Lumen gentium*,” Leys, 162.

61. Leys, 171.

62. *Ibid.*, 193.

The principle of subsidiarity applied to the Church would involve the recognition and promotion of the rights of moral persons, both those arising from natural law as well as from divine right. The formal recognition of the moral personality by divine right of local churches would, for example, entail a real influence, by right and not just by concession, in the appointment of local bishops instead of the current complete dependence on central authority.<sup>63</sup>

On the level of the individual, there should be in the Church the protection and promotion not only of those rights acquired through baptism, but also of the human rights and freedom that belong to the faithful inasmuch as they are human beings.<sup>64</sup> The Church has indeed officially recognised fundamental human rights in many settings, but although some of these rights are included in the list of rights and obligations common to all the Christian faithful in the 1983 *Code of canon law*, “there is no explicit affirmation of the acceptance of all human rights within the canonical system.”<sup>65</sup> Moreover, the legal provisions for vindicating personal rights (of whatever kind) in the Church appears to be inadequate.<sup>66</sup> The mandatory setting up of independent administrative tribunals at the level of episcopal conferences for vindicating rights which may have been harmed by administrative actions of bishops or other Church officials would certainly contribute to overcome this inadequacy.<sup>67</sup>

63. See *Ibid.*, 202. See 4.3 Participation in the choice of Church leaders, *infra*, for further elaboration of this topic.

64. See LEYS, 205–207.

65. JAMES H. PROVOST, *Rights of persons in the Church*, in *Catholicism and liberalism. Contributions to American public philosophy*, edited by R. Bruce Douglass – David Hollenbach, Cambridge – New York – Melbourne 1994, 313. The proposal of the final draft of the *Lex ecclesiae fundamentalis* for the Church to acknowledge all the fundamental human rights of her members never materialised. See *Ibid.*, 309. In effect, the *Lex ecclesiae fundamentalis*, which was originally intended to serve also as a bill of rights of the members of the Church, was eventually partially absorbed by the code. See LEONARD SWIDLER, *Toward a Catholic constitution*, New York 1996, 126–127.

66. Provost shows that these legal provisions lean “heavily in favour of administrators and institutional concerns rather than the rights of the Christian faithful.” The technicalities involved (like peremptory time limits), difficulties of distance and difference in language, as well as the money and time involved, all contribute toward the discouragement of legitimate cases. See PROVOST, *Rights of persons*, 311–312.

67. The code in canon 1733, 2 does include a reference to the possibility of establishing a permanent office or council at the level of the conference of bishops or, if this is not set up, at the diocesan level to find equitable solutions when persons feel they have been injured by their pastors. But, the nature of this sort of tribunal is optional and the sole responsibility of the bishop in setting it up when this is done at the level of the diocese undermines its independence.



In 1972, Karl Rahner predicted that the Church was going to become one built “from below by basic communities as a result of free initiative and association.”<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the following years saw in the Church the growth of basic communities of various kinds: bible-study groups, socially and politically committed ecclesial basic communities, charismatic renewal groups, and so on. Unfortunately, the vital importance of all such groups to Church life has not been realised by all, and some groups have been held up by Church officials at different levels.<sup>69</sup> Even if one does not consider deeper theological premises, on a human level, subsidiarity demands that such groups should have been, and should be, promoted and encouraged.

#### 4.2 *Participation in the decision-making*

Aware of the importance of greater participation in the Church, the Second Vatican Council called for the establishment or reorganisation of various bodies at the different levels of the Church’s structure. These bodies, starting with the synod of bishops and ending with the parish pastoral council were all eventually launched as consultative and advisory bodies. The persons meant to consult and take the advice of these bodies, be it the pope in respect to the synod of bishops (unless he grants the synod special deliberative power), a bishop in respect to his diocesan pastoral council or (almost always) his presbyteral council, or a parish priest in respect to his parish pastoral council, remain by law, for all intents and purposes, free to reject the counsel given without even needing to explain the reasons for their rejection.<sup>70</sup> As it is, the manner the pope, bishops, and parish priests govern the particular reality of the Church under their aegis depends too much on the actual personality and vision of the individuals concerned. It is by law possible for a parish priest, even more so for a bishop, and practically unboundedly so for a pope to govern in as authoritarian a fashion as to their liking.

68. KARL RAHNER, *The shape of the Church to come*, translation and introduction by Edward Quinn, London 1974, 108.

69. Suspicion of politically and socially committed ecclesial basic communities has not been rare especially in the upper echelons of the Church. Charismatic groups find opposition for their rather unconventional liturgical and para-liturgical gatherings. Other groups like the neo-Catechumens have found opposition especially from those (including various parish priests) who maintain that territorial parishes should be practically the sole basic elements of the Church. Nevertheless, very encouraging in this context is John Paul II’s declaration in *Novo millennio ineunte* in favour of the promotion of the diverse forms of association of the faithful. The pope cites 1 Th 5, 19–21: “Do not stifle the Spirit or despise the gift of prophecy with contempt; test everything and hold on to what is good.” See Pope John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, 46.

70. See *Code of canon law* (1983), canons 343, 514, 1, 500, 2, 536, 2.

While true to their proper role, the pope, the bishops, and even parish priests have the inalienable right and responsibility of taking decisions, what are presently just their consultative and advisory bodies should become deliberative bodies involved more seriously in the Church's decision-making process.<sup>71</sup>

Karl Rahner held that the issues where the faithful could and even should take part in the deliberative decision-making process are many. This celebrated systematic theologian believed strongly in the binding character of decisions taken by what would be juridically instituted deliberative fora that included lay participants. He thought that a local bishop or an episcopal conference could not be bound by the decision of such a forum "only if that authority could declare conscientiously that it [the decision] was clearly contrary to the substance of the Church's faith or to the *iure divino* constitution of the Church."<sup>72</sup> In such a context, the authorities in charge would always be able to veto resolutions put forward by the body they preside,<sup>73</sup> but they would be not only morally but also juridically bound to explain clearly and publicly the grave reasons behind their final choice.

Moreover, it should be secured that the deliberative bodies involved in the Church's decision-making process are formed up of persons the majority of whom are chosen appositely by the faithful in general. This will ensure that all the members of the Church will feel and actually be involved in this process. To take the case of the parish pastoral council as an example, particular Church law should prohibit that its members be all or in the greatest part nominated by the parish priest. Rather it should become the norm that some members, say a third, be duly elected, or chosen by a system of rotation, by the parish groups they hail from. The parishioners in general would elect another third, while the rest will be *ex officio* or nominated members.

71. In his 1969 interview Cardinal Suenens had distinguished between decision-making and decision-taking. Suenens believed that those affected by a decision were to be involved in the steps leading up to the decision. "Their role is not necessarily to share in the decision-taking, but in the decision-making, and we must be ready to accept that role loyally and with sincerity," LEON-JOSEPH SUENENS, *The Suenens interview*, in *The Suenens dossier. The case for collegiality*, edited by José de Broucker, Dublin – London 1970, 16.

72. Karl Rahner, *Theological investigations*, xx, *Concern for the Church*, London 1981, 124.

73. See Küng, 88.

### 4.3 *Participation in the choice of Church leaders*

As already shown in a previous article,<sup>74</sup> during the first centuries of the Church the faithful actively participated in the selection of their bishops. Today, almost all bishops in the Roman Catholic Church are chosen by Rome.<sup>75</sup> While the appropriation of the selection of bishops by the papacy did serve a function insofar as undue interference by secular political powers and excessive provincialism were curbed, today the time is ripe again to consider a return to a greater participation in the selection of a bishop by those who actually make up the particular church in question.

The mutual interiority that exists between the particular church and the universal Church demands both the recognition of the true subjectivity of the particular church as well as the fact that this subjectivity can only be exercised in communion with the universal Church.<sup>76</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, way back in 1970, insisted that this implied that the designation of ministries in the Church should never take place only as an initiative “from above”. Nor should it, on the other hand, take place only as an initiative “from below”.<sup>77</sup> The appointment of persons to occupy ecclesiastical offices should thus respect both the particularity of the local ecclesial entity involved as well as the need to maintain communion with the universal Church. In the present system, the appointment of bishops does not respect enough the subjectivity of the local church; it “lacks equilibrium.”<sup>78</sup> While some form of recognition and confirmation coming from outside the local church (the person involved has to be accepted as a member of the college of bishops with and under the pope) remains essential, the local church should enjoy a greater say on the choice of its leader.<sup>79</sup> This is not to say that the office of bishop in the Church derives “its authority strictly

74. DAVID POLIDANO, *Democratic Elements in the Early Church*, 43-48.

75. Apart from the Eastern churches united with Rome, who still, by and large, maintain the right to elect their bishops through the synod of bishops and patriarchs, Hans Küng names the Swiss bishoprics of Basle, Chur, and St Gall, as well as the archdiocese of Olmütz (Olomouc, in the Czech Republic), as great exceptions since they still keep the chiefly unrestricted right to elect their own bishops. See KÜNG, 91.

76. See RATZINGER, *Democratizzazione della Chiesa?*, 45-49.

77. See *Ibid.*, 49-50.

78. LADISLAS ÖRSY, *The papacy for an ecumenical age: A response to Avery Dulles*, in *America* 21 (October 2000) 12.

79. It has been reported that this theme was brought up by some cardinals during the consistory that met in May 2001. See VICTOR L. SIMPSON, *Reform-minded cardinals visit Rome*, in *The associated press* (on-line) : [http://dailynews.yahoo.com/h/ap/20010523/wl/vatican\\_cardinals\\_15.html](http://dailynews.yahoo.com/h/ap/20010523/wl/vatican_cardinals_15.html) [24 May 2001].

as such merely from the will of the individual members of the Church.”<sup>80</sup> It is just a matter of trying to find the best way how a person can be chosen for such an office. After all, as Antonio Rosmini stated in 1848, when it comes to the choice of a bishop two issues have definitely to be catered for: “that the best possible persons be chosen as pastors of the Church; and that they be recognised as the best by the flock entrusting to them the care of their souls.”<sup>81</sup> And it has to be remarked that while the present centralised system may, though surely not always, achieve the first,<sup>82</sup> it can never be as good at the second as a system involving the faithful in the choice of their bishop.

An important step for a greater participation on the local level in the choice of bishops can be taken if the system suggested above (of deliberative ecclesial bodies recognised to a considerable extent as representative of the faithful in general) is put into effect. After polling the people of the diocese in terms of their profile for an ideal bishop,<sup>83</sup> such bodies can then be the appropriate entities, instead of the papal nuncio or the apostolic legate, to put forward the *ternus* (the list of three candidates in order of preference) from which the bishop could then be chosen by Rome. Such a system would serve both unity within the particular church (that is, unity between the people, the clergy, and the bishop)<sup>84</sup> and unity between the particular and the universal Church as it avoids the feeling of imposition from above that often alienates so many of the faithful. Unity would be further served if the whole notion of representation would then be applied even to papal elections. Instead of the current system where a pope is elected by the cardinals appointed by his predecessor/s, a new method can be employed where a pope would be selected by delegates representing national episcopal conferences.<sup>85</sup> With regard to the choice of parish pastors, Owen O’Sullivan has come up with an interesting and

80. RAHNER, *The shape of the Church*, 119.

81. ANTONIO ROSMINI SERBATI, *On the choice of bishops by clergy and people. Three letters to canon Giuseppe Gatti*, 3, in *Rosmini-in-english* (online) : [http://www.rosmini-in-english.org/Five-Wounds/FW\\_AppLetter03.htm](http://www.rosmini-in-english.org/Five-Wounds/FW_AppLetter03.htm) [21 August 2001].

82. Owen O’Sullivan insists that this is not the case. “There are better men available that those we are getting, and a real consultative process involving the local church would bring them forward,” O’SULLIVAN, 84.

83. See JOHN A. COLEMAN, *Not democracy but democratisation*, in *A democratic Catholic Church*, 240.

84. Clearly, such a system would be much less prone to the danger of factionalism than a system which envisages the direct election of a bishop by all the faithful.

85. It has been said that a decree in this sense already sat on Pope Paul VI’s desk in 1970, “but he was dissuaded from signing it by conservative curial elements,” SWIDLER, *Toward a Catholic constitution*, 92.

practicable suggestion. A selection panel made up of the bishop and some priests and lay faithful chosen by the members of the parish as their representatives can discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the particular community and review together possible candidates.<sup>86</sup>

Another possibility that would definitely make of the Church a more democratised institution is the adoption of a system of limited terms of office. Focussing on the episcopal office, as it is, unless he dies in office, resigns, or is forced to resign by Rome, a bishop's term of office lasts either until he is seventy-five of age (and his resignation is accepted by the pope), or until his transfer to another diocese. Establishing pre-set time limits to a bishop's office to, for example, seven years, granting also the possibility of re-election, would systematically promote accountability, a fundamental element in any democracy and one which still "remains one of the weak spots in the Church's legal system."<sup>87</sup>

#### 4.4 A wider diffusion of ideas and information

If the participation of the faithful in the decision-making process within the Church and in the selection of Church leaders is to be fruitful, then it has to be ensured that Christians are really and effectively empowered to play their part in all this.<sup>88</sup> A wider diffusion of ideas and information is a necessary precondition of participation in the Church. Those in office have to keep the faithful informed of what they are doing and why. The grassroots, on the other hand, have to be enabled to keep their leaders informed of their views and needs.<sup>89</sup> The 1971 pastoral instruction *Communio et progressio* had promised that Church authorities were to "take care to ensure that there is responsible exchange of freely held and expressed opinion among the people of God. More than this, they will set up norms and conditions for this to take place."<sup>90</sup>

86. See O'SULLIVAN, 79.

87. JAMES H. PROVOST, *Prospects for a more democratised Church*, in *The tabu of democracy within the Church*, 138. It is interesting to note that as a theologian at Tübingen Joseph Ratzinger was one of the signatories of a document carefully arguing in favour of a term of office limited to eight years for resident bishops. See SWIDLER, *Toward a Catholic constitution*, 129.

88. See LEHMANN, 86.

89. The pastoral instruction *Communio et progressio* insisted that "the normal flow of life and the smooth functioning of government within the Church require a steady two-way flow of information between the ecclesiastical authorities at all levels and the faithful as individuals and as organized groups," PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS, Pastoral Instruction *Communio et progressio*, (23 May 1971), 120.

90. *Ibid.*, 116.

The 1983 *Code of canon law* did recognise the right of the Christian faithful “to make known their needs, especially spiritual ones, and their desires to the pastors of the Church.”<sup>91</sup> Moreover, it states that “they have the right and even at times a duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church.”<sup>92</sup> Michael Fahey remarks that what is not clear, however, is how to find truly effective ways for expressing these needs and opinions.<sup>93</sup>

In an age when information and communication technology (ICT) has developed to extents until recently unimagined, new ways seem to be opening up for the faithful as well as for the Church hierarchy to develop a wider and quicker communication between them. Many local bishops now have their pastoral letters, homilies, and so on, easily accessible on-line. Most often diocesan websites also offer the faithful the opportunity to give their feedback and make their requests through electronic mail. Of course, technological advances have to be coupled by an increase in human resources to be able to group ideas and requests on their way to the concerned authorities and to respond in a satisfactory and efficient manner.

On the level of the universal Church attention must be made not to turn ICT developments into a tool whereby centralisation may be increased. Unfortunately, the immediacy with which information travels around the globe in today’s world might be used to tighten the Vatican’s control over far-off local churches, thus imposing greater uniformity and stultifying local initiative.<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, another option remains open:

the Vatican could become a centralised clearinghouse, a forum for discussing ideas and programs coming from local churches that could be shared and evaluated by other local churches. This would require a loosening of control by the Vatican, where the pope would be seen as a facilitator of communication and a consensus builder rather than a monarch who knows what is best for everyone.<sup>95</sup>

91. *Code of canon law* (1983), canon 212, 2.

92. *Ibid.*, canon 212, 3.

93. MICHAEL FAHEY, *Diocesan governance in modern Catholic theology and in the 1983 Code of Canon Law*, in *The ministry of governance*, 137.

94. See THOMAS J. REESE, *Inside the Vatican, The politics and organisation of the Catholic Church*, Cambridge – London 1996, 279.

95. *Ibid.*

## 5 Conclusion

Karl Rahner felt sure that “opportunities for structural change in the Church are extraordinarily great, although they are often not seen clearly enough even as mere opportunities and the institutional Church ... looks too hesitantly and too nervously at these possible changes of the Church’s structures.”<sup>96</sup> The historical development of the Church’s tri-partite ordained ministry and of the papacy are in themselves proof of structural changeability in the Church. This is not to say that every structure in the Church is simply the result of historical contingency or that structures that have long been considered as divinely instituted can be done away with. The Church is a Spirit-guided institution and it is the Spirit of God who ultimately guides her historical development. Indeed, this is why the Church should never consider herself as monolithically unchangeable: we cannot pretend to restrict the Holy Spirit’s life-giving action in the Church.

In a time when democracy has been adopted both as a vision and a system of government by so many countries in the world, the pressure on the Church to become more democratised is great. It is a pressure that comes both from within, as its members have become accustomed to the democratic way of life and to democratic procedures, as well as from without, as the secular world often beseeched by the Church to espouse and employ an authentic version of democracy demands that its teacher puts into practice her own teachings. History shows that the Church did adopt much from secular society that had nothing to do with her proper nature.<sup>97</sup> The odd thing is that while the Church made little opposition to the adoption of structures and systems that were completely foreign to the Gospel, the Church has strongly resisted to apply within herself the democratic vision that has been shown to be much more in consonance with her own nature. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that while previous influences tended to enhance the power and prestige of the Church’s leaders, democratisation may be considered by them as potentially subversive of their established status and authority.

In the quest for a more democratic Church the issue of whether Catholics should wait for structural change “from above” or else start it off from the grassroots has to be dealt with. Although what happens “above” does have big effects on the Church, waiting for inspired individuals who are open enough to change may prove to be a

96. RAHNER, *Theological investigations*, xx, 115.

97. Suffice to mention the influence on the Church of imperial Rome, of feudalism, and of absolute monarchy.

very long process indeed. On the other hand, many changes can take place without big difficulties at the grassroots level, which can also make a great impact on the Church as a whole. Without going against current canonical legislation, present structures like the parish pastoral council can be developed into a much more democratic organ as suggested above. Once the idea gets hold at the parish level it will spread to other parishes and eventually to the diocesan level. The future of the Church is not primarily in the hands of the hierarchy, it is above all in the hands of the Spirit and the Spirit can work through whoever he wishes.

The conclusion of this dissertation is not that democracy in the Church implies the dismantling of its present structure in favour of some sort of direct rule by the people.<sup>98</sup> What is implied is a revision of Church structures in line with a more genuine application of principles already declared in Church doctrine as basic to her nature: a broader and more genuine exercise of collegiality at all her levels, a more authentic application of the belief in the radical equality of all the baptised and their share in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and royal mission, and the true employment of the gospel vision of authority as true service. After all, John Paul II himself, in *Novo millennio ineunte*, affirmed that Church structures, naming in particular the papacy and episcopal collegiality, "need to be examined constantly in order to ensure that they follow their genuinely evangelical inspiration."<sup>99</sup>

A more democratised Church would still be a universal Church under the leadership of the pope and a communion of particular churches each under its own bishop. It is a vision of the Church not much different from that held by Cyprian of Carthage in the third century. It is a Church in which the pope is indeed the symbol and source of unity, but not an absolute ruler. Each particular Church is led by its bishop; in Cyprian's words, "the bishop is in the Church and the Church in the

98. Unfortunately, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, the former prefect of the CDF, now elected as Pope Benedict XVI, seems to interpret any horizontal understanding of the concept of the people of God and the Ensuing talk about Church democratisation as a struggle against the hierarchy for power in the Church. See JOSEPH RATZINGER, *L'ecclesiologia della costituzione 'Lumen gentium'*, Address to International Convention on the implementation of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (27 February 2000) in *Official website of the Holy See* (on-line) : [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000227\\_ratzinger-lumen-gentium\\_it.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000227_ratzinger-lumen-gentium_it.html) [14 April 2001].
99. POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, 44. Although in the following paragraph the pope remarks that "the structures of participation envisaged by Canon Law, such as the council of priests and the pastoral council ... are not governed by the rules of parliamentary democracy, because they are consultative rather than deliberative," this does not rule out that such structures could, in the future, become deliberative organs.



bishop; and if any one be not with the bishop, ... he is not in the Church.”<sup>100</sup> But, as can be seen clearly in a letter to his presbyters and deacons, Cyprian believed also in the participation of all the faithful in decision-making: “from the first commencement of my episcopacy, I made up my mind to do nothing on my own private opinion, without your advice [of the clergy] and without the consent of the people.”<sup>101</sup> The only difference is that such a vision of the Church should not depend just on the will (or lack of it) of the particular incumbents of ecclesiastical offices; it should be implemented through juridically mandated structures that allow and promote the truly active participation of all the faithful in the life of the Church.

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100. CYPRIAN OF CARTHAGE, *Epistles* LXVIII, 8.

101. CYPRIAN OF CARTHAGE, *Epistles* V, 4.

