When the first waves of shock over the sex abuse scandal were reverberating around the Archdiocese of Chicago a few years ago, Cardinal George asked me to write a series of articles and to give some talks to respond to people’s concerns over the validity of the sacraments performed by pedophile priests and over the nature of a sacramental church in general. After submitting the draft articles to the cardinal for review, I was surprised to find that he had objected to my statement that “all Catholics are part of the hierarchy.” I wrote the cardinal explaining that I was using the term the way that Gregory the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Robert Bellarmine, and others had used it. He conceded that I could use the term that way, but he also said that my statement would be confusing to most lay Catholics and he referred me to the catechism’s definition of hierarchy to make his point. The second edition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines hierarchy this way: “The Apostles and their successors, the college of bishops, to whom Christ gave the authority to teach, sanctify, and rule the Church in his name” (*Catechism*, 881).

As I gave talks to various diocesan groups from lay ministers to school teachers, I found that the people who were either actively working in ministry or preparing for it basically accepted the definition of hierarchy as primarily referring to the bishops and secondarily to priests and deacons. Further, many people identified “the church” with “the hierarchy” in ways that were less flattering than the catechism and were willing to see the church as comprised of “them” rather than of “us.” Understanding the history of this term and its use highlights two odious consequences of this new definition of hierarchy: it disenfranchises the laity and it generates discord in the Body of Christ.

Dionysius the Areopagite, or Denys as the French call him, introduced the term “hierarchy” into Christian theology sometime in the fifth century. He defined hierarchy this way: “In my opinion a hierarchy is a sacred order, a state of understanding and an activity approximating as closely as

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possible to the divine” (Celestial Hierarchy, 3.1). The goal of every hierarchy, according to Denys, is to empower beings to be as like God as is possible and to be one with God. He explained that a hierarchy has God as its leader in terms of all understanding and action. Further, hierarchy bears in itself the mark of God causing its members to become spotless mirrors reflecting the glow of God’s very being to the world. Finally, hierarchy ensures that its members who have received the divine splendor can then pass on this light generously and in accordance to God’s will. Denys explained that perfection for every member of the hierarchy is to be uplifted to imitate God as far as possible and to become a person that St. Paul calls a “co-worker for God” in 1 Corinthians 3:9 or Romans 16:3 ( Celestial Hierarchy, 3.2).

Denys taught that every hierarchy, insofar as it reflects God, must have a trinitarian dimension. So he concluded that hierarchies are ordered in threes. The nine angelic hierarchies of the angels, which Denys constructed out of the various references to angels in Scripture, reflect the perichoresis of the Father, Son, and Spirit. When it came to the earthly hierarchy, which is modeled on the heavenly hierarchies, Denys saw six orders in the church: bishops, priests, deacons, monks, baptized Christians, and catechumens ( Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, 5.1–6.3). In other words, everyone who belongs to the church is a member of the hierarchy with the aim of being a “co-worker” for God insofar as they are able. Though the members are part of a hierarchical whole, each receives grace from God directly.

A Dionysian understanding of hierarchy is better understood as pointing to sacramental or spiritual value than to juridical or institutional norms. The identifying characteristic of hierarchy, as it was originally conceived, was the function to lift up the lowest member. In that sense, hierarchy is like being “upliftingly stooped.” It is the motion of bending down to help pick someone up (Celestial Hierarchy, 2.3). While Denys does not say so explicitly, this coming down to lift up is an ecclesial form of imitating the Son’s self-emptying kenosis. As a reflection of the trinitarian relations, the orders of the hierarchy should be marked by an ongoing self-gift for and to the other orders. Rather than a static structure, hierarchy was conceived to be a dynamic reality.

Since hierarchy was not reduced to institutional terms or to ecclesial offices, it was used to justify reform movements in the Middle Ages. An obviously corrupt or sinful bishop was seen as holding the highest hierarchical office but the lowest place in the spiritual hierarchy ( Pastoral Care, 3.28). Gregory the Great described such bishops as the making themselves into the image of Satan by their presumption ( Pastoral Care, 2.6). He suggested that those who held lower offices in the church must speak out when they are offended by the stench of episcopal wickedness ( Moralia, preface, 5.12). Because of the bad example they set, Peter Damian advocated deposing unworthy bishops (Letters, 61.4-9). In his sermon On Conversion, Bernard of Clairvaux begged men who held higher offices in an unworthy manner to voluntarily relinquish their offices and to take up lives of penance in the monastery. Gratian’s standard text of canon law in the Middle Ages even advocated deposing popes who drag people down rather than lifting them up (Decretum, 40.6). Thus lower members of the hierarchy did have the function and duty to respond to corruption in the higher orders.

The traditional concept of hierarchy emphasized mutual accountability and responsibility between the orders of the church. This idea is quite clear in this passage from Catherine of Siena:

Thus have I given you reason—necessity, in fact—to practice mutual
charity. For I could have supplied each of you with all of your needs, both spiritual and material. But I wanted to make you (laity and clergy) dependent on one another so that each of you would be my minister, dispensing the graces and gifts you have received from me. (Dialogue, 7)

In fact, Catherine believed that God set up the hierarchy so that the laity would see the need to reform the clergy rather than to abandon them to their own destruction.

There were, of course, theologians in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries who essentially identified hierarchy with the ordained clergy. Usually they were motivated by a desire to exclude new groups, like the Franciscans and Dominicans, from practicing ministry and working for pastoral care reform. A good example is William of St. Amour, whose ecclesiology was condemned in the thirteenth century. The participation of the laity (including the religious) in the hierarchical governance of the church can be seen in the fact that the Council of Constance (1414–18) allowed representatives of the laity to vote on the various decrees (Oakley, 64).

When did this idea that the laity are not part of the hierarchy become part of the magisterial teaching of the church? It was the Second Vatican Council that imported a technical definition of hierarchy from canon law, which used hierarchy to designate the bishops and clergy, into ecclesiology. The fathers at the Second Vatican Council included this particular understanding of hierarchy as a means to placate Cardinal Ottaviani and the integralists, who opposed the reforms of the council. Thus Lumen Gentium has three ecclesiologies, two of which are inclusive perspectives of the church as mystery and as people of God. It seems that the third, which identified hierarchy with the bishops, is slowly swallowing the other two ecclesiologies. When Lumen Gentium turned to the laity in chapter four, it defined them in contradistinction to the hierarchy.

This shift in meaning is not simply a matter of semantics. How we understand hierarchy frames our self-understanding, mission, and behavior. The current concept of hierarchy does not reflect the doctrine of the Trinity, but it does a good job of incarnating the trinitarian heresy of subordinationism. It also creates an environment where bishops see their duty to protect the hierarchy as extending only to the clergy. How can we avoid polarization if the church is truly divided into two camps where one has all of the power and privilege? By returning to the tradition, we can arrive at an understanding of hierarchy that does not contradict Christ’s command, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant (Matt 20:25-26). As for the article I wrote, Cardinal George agreed that I could say, “In the fullest sense, we are all members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and we all share the mission of serving others.”

References


