

Dignity, Diversity, and Complementarity: The Lay Faithful in the Ecclesiology of Pope John Paul II

ANTHONY A. AKINWALE, OP

Dominican Institute

Ibadan, Nigeria

THE UNHAPPY OCCURRENCES of sexual abuse of minors by priests; the extent, persistence, tone, and slant of media coverage; and the reactions that have followed brought to the fore the issue of the relationship between the lay faithful and the hierarchy in the Church. To say that the trust and confidence that the lay faithful have for the hierarchy is undergoing erosion is to state the obvious. Some have voiced the opinion that governance of the Church should be in the hands of the lay faithful.

Yet, as scholars of Church history often point out, the Church is no stranger to conflict. Apart from the Christological controversy and other doctrinal conflicts, there are, in fact, examples of conflicts between the people and those who exercise authority in the Church. Already, in the New Testament, the contents, language, and style of 1 and 2 Corinthians show that the relationship between the Apostle Paul and the Church in Corinth was characterized by friction. The letter of Clement of Rome to the same Church in Corinth occasioned by the deposition of some of its presbyters by some of its members gives the impression that friction between the members and the leaders of the Church remained long after Paul's letters to the same Church. And, in a relatively recent past, preceding the firestorm of recent months, one can cite the example of the reaction to the publication of Paul VI's *Humanae vitae*.

In the midst of conflicts, it is difficult to avoid the temptation of adopting an either-or position. In our own time, the lay faithful and the pastors are pitched against each other, and sometimes the clergy and the bishop

are like opposition parties in a raucous parliamentary session. The words of Jean-Marie Roger Tillard capture the scene we are watching, "Our communities are, today, divided by a frontier. On one side of it is the clergy, on the other side is the laity."¹

Using the postsynodal exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, I shall argue in this article that Pope John Paul II, following the example of the Second Vatican Council as well as the Patristic and New Testament texts which inspired the council, presents an ecclesiology in which the common dignity and fundamental equality of the baptized are affirmed alongside the diversity and complementarity of their gifts. If the Church of our time is to be faithful to apostolic tradition explicated at Vatican II, this vision of the Church will need to be taken seriously.

Baptismal Dignity and Biblical Imagery

The place of the lay faithful in the ecclesiology of Pope John Paul II can be discerned from the affirmation of their dignity and identity, and in the articulation of their mission in the exhortation *Christifideles Laici*. In it, the baptismal dignity of the lay faithful is expressed by way of reference to the gospel parable of the laborers hired for the vineyard and the biblical imagery of the vine and the branches. Pope John Paul II describes the lay members of Christ's faithful people as "those who form that part of the People of God which might be likened to the laborers in the vineyard mentioned in Matthew's gospel" (*Christifideles Laici*, no. 1; Mt 20).

The vineyard into which Christ has sent the lay members of his faithful is the whole world. This is not to be interpreted as excluding the lay faithful from active presence and participation within the Church. The vocation of the lay faithful is unique. But that does not exclude them from sharing in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly mission of Christ. Their mission is to bring about a transformation that conforms with the plan of God, since the call to work in the vineyard is not exclusively addressed to the clergy and religious but to everyone in the Church. It is a vocation to work with Christ in a

new manner of active collaboration among priests, religious, and lay faithful; the active participation in the liturgy, in the proclamation of the Word of God and catechesis; the multiplicity of services and tasks entrusted to the lay faithful and fulfilled by them; the flourishing of groups, associations, and spiritual movements as well as a lay commitment in the life of the Church; and in the fuller and meaningful participation of women in the development of society (*Christifideles Laici*, no. 2)

¹ Jean-Marie Roger Tillard, OP, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 211.

The economic, social, political, and cultural affairs of our world describe the vineyard that the world is. It is a world of religious indifference, atheism, and de-Christianization which call for re-evangelization, a world in which the very denial of religion manifests a profound need for religion, a world in which various forms of violation of the dignity of the human person take place regularly, a world buffeted by conflict and yearning for peace. Faced with this situation, the Church places her hope on Jesus Christ who himself is the Good News and the bearer of joy. According to Pope John Paul II, "The lay faithful have an essential and irreplaceable role in this announcement and in this testimony: through them the Church of Christ is made present in the various sectors of the world, as a sign and source of hope and of love" (*Christifideles Laici*, no. 7).

But the parable of the hired laborers does not offer an exhaustive description of the lay faithful. Pope John Paul II joins it to the imagery of the vine and the branches by pointing out that the vine is an expression of the mystery of the people of God. Consequently, in line with the Old Testament application of the imagery of the vine to the chosen people, in line with Jesus' use of the same imagery to explain the mystery of the kingdom, and since Jesus himself said "I am the vine and you [his disciples] are the branches" (Jn 15:5), it can be asserted that the "lay faithful are seen not simply as laborers who work in the vineyard, but as themselves being a part of the vineyard" (*Christifideles Laici*, no. 8). Quoting from the Second Vatican Council, Pope John Paul II emphasizes that the whole Church is like branches of the vine deriving life and fruitfulness from Christ who is the true vine. She gratuitously receives through Christ the very life and love of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. With this communication of Trinitarian love, she can relive the very communion of God. She can manifest it and communicate it in history through her mission (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 6).

With these in mind, it can be said that the Church's mystery as communion, which has the *ad intra* Trinitarian communion as analogue, provides a way of understanding the identity, dignity, and mission of the lay faithful. "Only from inside the Church's mystery of communion is the 'identity' of the lay faithful made known, and their fundamental dignity revealed. Only within the context of this dignity can their vocation and mission in the Church and in the world be defined" (*Christifideles Laici*, no. 8). The lay faithful fully belong to the Church and to its mystery even as their vocation has a unique character (*Christifideles Laici*, no. 9). The basic description of the lay faithful can become more explicit when it is referred to the sacrament of Baptism. The branches, of which the lay faithful are parts, become grafted (incorporated) into Christ through the

sacrament of Baptism. That they fully belong to the Church, just as the branches fully belong to the vine, comes from their baptismal regeneration in the life of the Son of God, union with Christ and his body the Church, and anointing in the Holy Spirit which makes Christians into spiritual temples. This spiritual anointing, Pope John Paul II reminds the Church, makes of the lay faithful sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly mission of Christ.

With this spiritual “unction,” Christians can repeat in an individual way the words of Jesus: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me.” . . . Thus with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Baptism and Confirmation, the baptized share in the same mission of Jesus as the Christ, the Savior-Messiah. (*Christifideles Laici*, no. 13)

One must not fail to remark here that by speaking of the sharing of the lay faithful in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly mission of Christ as a gift that flows from their Baptism, Pope John Paul II was reaffirming a teaching of the Second Vatican Council. For, according to the council, “By regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, the baptized are consecrated into a spiritual house.”² The Holy Father, conscious of the fact that Vatican II was itself in continuity with the living tradition of the Church, locates a patristic explanation of this teaching in Augustine’s Christological and ecclesiological interpretation of Psalm 26:

David was anointed king. In those days only a king and a priest were anointed. These two persons prefigured the one and only priest and king who was to come, Christ (the name “Christ” means “anointed”). Not only has our head been anointed but we, his body, have also been anointed . . . therefore *anointing* comes to all Christians, even though in Old Testament times it belonged only to two persons. Clearly we are the Body of Christ because we are all “anointed” and in him are “christs,” that is “anointed ones,” as well as Christ himself, “The Anointed One.” In a certain way, then, it thus happens that with head and body the whole Christ is formed.³

This patristic and conciliar consciousness of the dignity and vocation of the lay faithful was clearly echoed at the beginning of his pontificate when Pope John Paul II affirmed:

He who was born of the Virgin Mary, the carpenter’s Son as he was thought to be Son of the living God (confessed by Peter), has come to

² Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 10.

³ Augustine, Ennar. in Ps. XXVI, II, 2: *Enarrationes Psalmos*, 38, 154 ff.

make us “a kingdom of priests.” The Second Vatican Council has reminded us of the mystery of this power and of the fact that the mission of Christ—Priest, Prophet-Teacher, King—continues in the Church. Everyone, the whole People of God, shares in this threefold mission.⁴

While the parable of the workers in the vineyard helps to see the lay faithful as workers in the vineyard that the world is, the imagery of the vine and the branches helps to see the same lay faithful as part of the vineyard that the Church is. Therefore, according to Pope John Paul II, the lay faithful are not just workers in the vineyard, they themselves are a part of the vineyard since the gospel image of the vineyard describes the Church. This permits us to situate the lay faithful within the conciliar ecclesiology of communion which is the key to any authentic interpretation of Vatican II. Pope John Paul II was keenly aware of the centrality and foundational character of this ecclesiology to Vatican II when he wrote that, “only from inside the Church’s mystery of communion is the identity of the lay faithful made known, and their fundamental dignity revealed. Only within the context of this dignity can their vocation and mission in the Church and in the world be defined” (*Christifideles Laici*, no. 8). The baptized are regenerated to become “children in the Son,” “members of Christ and members of the body of the Church.” Baptism brings them into the *sanctorum communionem*, which Pope John Paul II explains by using words spoken by his predecessor Pope Paul VI after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. By using these words spoken by Pope Paul VI right after the council ended, Pope John Paul II himself demonstrates that, contrary to what some commentators claim, his own reflection is within on-going tradition. For Pope Paul VI,

the meaning of the Church is a communion of saints. “Communion” speaks of a double, life-giving participation: the incorporation of Christians into the life of Christ, and the communication of that life of charity to the entire body of the faithful, in this world and in the next, union with Christ and in Christ, and union among Christians in the Church.⁵

The vital union that exists between the Vine (Christ) and the branches (the faithful) comes about through baptismal regeneration. The same baptismal regeneration confers a common dignity and a fundamental equality among all the baptized, and the common dignity that flows from Baptism

⁴ John Paul II, “Homily at the Beginning of his Pastoral Ministry as Supreme Shepherd of the Church,” October 22, 1978, *Acta Apostolicae Sedi* 70 (1978): 946.

⁵ Paul VI, Wednesday general audience (December 8, 1965), *Insegnamenti*, IV (1966): 794.

imposes on the lay faithful the duty of participating in the mission of the Church.⁶ From Baptism comes communion, from this communion we find the dignity and vocation of the lay faithful. By implication, one cannot speak of the dignity and vocation of the lay faithful outside ecclesial communion. Outside the “communion of saints,” Christ’s faithful are like branches cut off from the vine. The branches belong, not to themselves, but to the vine. The dignity of the disciple of Christ is rooted in the fact that he or she is incorporated to Christ and belongs to Christ. The patristic ecclesiology of Augustine and Cyprian, and of Clement of Alexandria and John Chrysostom, to use but these examples taken from Jean-Marie Roger Tillard’s *Flesh of Christ, Flesh of the Church*,⁷ enables us to see the fundamental identification between Christ the Head and his body the Church. The dignity and vocation of the lay faithful can never be seen apart from communion in the Church and with the Church, and there is no communion with the Church where there is no communion with the bishop who is Vicar of Christ in the local Church confided to his care in communion with the Successor of Peter. Consequently, being separated from the ecclesial body of Christ while claiming to be in union with Christ are hardly reconcilable.

The common dignity of Christ’s faithful does not exclude diversity and complementarity in the Church. Yet, within this diversity there is hierarchy. Such will be the next consideration in this essay.

Baptismal Dignity, Diversity, and Complementarity in the Church that is Communion

In moments of conflict, the Church always runs the risk of being turned into an arena of power struggle. At times when the clergy is rightly or wrongly perceived as incompetent, unholy, uncaring, and autocratic, there may be a strong temptation to repudiate the authority of the Church’s pastors, even to the point of wresting power and authority from the clergy. Consequently, this is not a new temptation in the history of the Church. What is perhaps new is the attempt to provide a theological justification for such a step through recourse to the common dignity and fundamental equality that come from baptismal regeneration. Martin

⁶ Concerning this common dignity and shared responsibility, Pope John Paul II refers to the Second Vatican Council. “As members, they share a common dignity from their rebirth in Christ, they have the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection. They possess in common one salvation, one hope, and one undivided charity.” *Lumen Gentium*, no. 32.

⁷ Jean-Marie Roger Tillard, OP, *Flesh of Christ, Flesh of the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992).

Luther already put forward the same argument in his letter *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*. Basing his argument on Baptism, Luther sought to collapse the distinction between what he called the temporal estate and the spiritual estate in order to place the governance of the Church and the interpretation of Scripture in the hands of laypeople, to be more specific, the German nobility.

Since those who exercise secular authority have been baptized with the same Baptism, and have the same faith and the same gospel as the rest of us, we must admit that they are priests and bishops and we must regard their office as one which has a proper and useful place in the Christian community. For whoever comes out of the water of Baptism can boast that he is already a consecrated priest, bishop, and pope, although of course it is not seemly that just anybody should exercise such office. Because we are all priests of equal standing, no one must push himself forward and take it upon himself, without our consent and election, to do that for which we all have equal authority. For no one dare take upon himself what is common to all without the authority and consent of the community. And should it happen that a person chosen for such office were deposed for abuse of trust, he would then be exactly what he was before. Therefore, a priest in Christendom is nothing else but an office-holder. As long as he holds office, he takes precedence; where he is deposed, he is a peasant or a townsman like anybody else. Indeed, a priest is never a priest when he is deposed. But now the Romanists have invented *characters indelebiles* and say that a deposed priest is nevertheless something different from a mere layman. They hold the illusion that a priest can never be anything other than a priest, or ever become a layman. All this is just contrived talk, and human regulation.

It follows from this argument that there is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes, and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the spiritual estate, all are truly priests, bishops, and popes. But they do not all have the same work. This is the teaching of St. Paul in Romans 12:4–5 and 1 Corinthians 12:12 and in 1 Peter 2:9, as I have said above, namely, that we are all one body of Christ the Head, and all members one of another. Christ does not have two different bodies, one temporal, the other spiritual. There is but one Head and one body.⁸

In the current climate of crisis and controversy within some local churches in Roman Catholicism, there are, on the part of some who are,

⁸ Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, in *Martin Luther: Three Treatises*, trans. Charles M. Jacobs and Rev. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 13–15.

rightly or wrongly, dissatisfied with the way the Church is governed, deliberate theoretical and practical efforts to substantially erode, and eventually remove, the authority of the clergy—the *hiereus-arche*. The argument is premised on the common dignity and fundamental equality of the faithful that come through baptismal regeneration. It is then considered legitimate to draw the conclusion that the lay faithful should “control” the Church. But I remark that while the premise of their argument is a position evidently shared with Pope John Paul II, the ecclesiology of those who argue this way is patently at odds with the ecclesiology of this Successor of Peter. For in John Paul II’s ecclesiology—that is, if one can speak of his ecclesiology in the proper sense of the word, since his writings and pronouncements, in my opinion, point to his appropriation of Vatican II’s ecclesiology—the recognition and affirmation of the common dignity, fundamental equality, and responsibility of all those regenerated by Baptism do not, by any justifiable theological means, amount to a nullification of diversity of charisms and ministries in the Church. Neither do they imply an abolition of the hierarchy. The Church that is communion is a communion of charisms, and, not only is it the case that there is hierarchy in this communion, it is also the case that a healthy Church is not without a hierarchy, and a healthy Church is one in which there is communion within the hierarchy, and communion between the hierarchy and the lay faithful.

What is being presented here is not John Paul II’s doctrinal innovation. Rather, one is dealing here with an ecclesiology in continuity with the apostolic origins of the Church, in as much as it echoes the conciliar recognition and reaffirmation of the Spirit-willed existence of diversity and hierarchy in the heart of ecclesial communion, a conciliar *prise de position* whose inspiration is both patristic and apostolic. To buttress this statement, we may retrace our steps.

The first step is to recall what is often forgotten in retrieving the ecclesiology of communion at Vatican II, that the constitution *Lumen Gentium* not only has a chapter on the people of God, it also has a chapter on the hierarchy. Consequently, to avoid a hermeneutics of monumental injustice, which will be to the detriment of the beautiful ecclesiological insights of the council, one would need to avoid reading one chapter in a way that ignores or de-emphasizes the doctrinal import of the other. Implicit in this division and in the doctrinal content of *Lumen Gentium* is the double recognition of diversity of charisms, and of the hierarchy as one of such diverse charisms.

The second step is to recall that even where the council speaks of the common priesthood of the people of God, it is clear that the intention

was neither to blur the distinction between the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood, nor to reduce the Church to an aggregate of priests.⁹ Concerning the distinction between the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood, the point is made by the council that the difference is not merely in degree but most importantly in essence. Consequently, the Second Vatican Council was not by any means an adoption of the theological option expressed in Luther's *Letter to the German Nobility*.

The third step is to explore the possibility of retrieving patristic and apostolic testimony in favor of this differentiation. A further examination of the first step is unnecessary here insofar as what I have just said about the chapters can be easily verified by looking at the constitution *Lumen Gentium*. A detailed examination of the theological distinction between the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood will require another essay. My focus will be on the third step. First one should look at patristic testimony; secondly, at the witness of the New Testament out of which, I am convinced, patristic ecclesiology is a legitimate doctrinal development.

But a word of caution must precede my examination of the testimony of New Testament and patristic ecclesiology. Jean-Marie Tillard has pointed out that

although it is acquainted with the term *kleros*, the first Christian literature is not aware of the opposition between clerics and laity. The *kleros* (part inherited, part chosen) designates the totality of Christians and among this totality, above all, the group destined for martyrdom. . . .

The New Testament, besides, is not aware of the term "laity," just as the Septuagint was not aware of it. The first appearance of this word in the *Letter of Clement* is an isolated case, even though it later played a key role.¹⁰

Tillard, basing his trust on Hippolytus's *Apostolic Tradition*, points to the beginning of the third century as the inception of the evolution which led to speaking about lay Christians or Christian clergy.

The one who will be designated as *cleric* is the one who is ordained for the liturgy (bishop, presbyter, deacon), more precisely the one who is ordained for this purpose, from the bishop, the official designation for worship (*cheirotomia*) which is effected through the imposition of hands (*cheirothesia*).

⁹ In order not to interpret 1 Peter 2:9–10 as describing the Church as an aggregate of priests, Tillard points out that the priesthood is "the primary important attribute of the community as such" (Tillard, *Church of Churches*, 170).

¹⁰ Tillard, *Church of Churches*, 211. See Clement of Rome, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, no. 40.

What is in question here is diaconia. Through ordination one enters into “the portion of the people of God” destined for its service, “a portion” whose honor consists of being of service for the *leitourgia*. Texts show that it remains evident again that it is the *entire* people gathered together who celebrate it. One was chosen for a role among this entire people, a role integrally contained within the dynamism of the community and inseparable from it. But soon, this “portion of the people of God” will be tempted to absorb or monopolize the functions necessary for the life of the community. There will be the *ordo* of clerics, including the entire clerical hierarchy, and the other group, the laity. This hardening of the frontier between clerics and laity will contribute to our losing sight of the fact that it is the entire people of God whom the Spirit calls to the service of the gospel and to take charge of its being faithful. It will lead to regrettable distortions in the ministerial function itself.¹¹

While Tillard’s reading counsels caution in reading the texts in search of testimony, it does not amount to blurring the distinction between the clergy and the laity. Instead, it offers a useful clarification as to how to consider the issue. The term “laity” might not have been found in the first Christian literature. Yet, it would be a case of the reality preceding the term. The entire People of God gathered to celebrate the liturgy, as described in Justin Martyr’s *First Apology*, and there has always been a portion of this People whose function was to be at the service of the People of God rendering its *leitourgia* to God. The existence and ministry of this “portion” preceded the testimony of the Church Fathers about to be cited here. The clergy was not the laity, and the laity was not the clergy. It is my contention that such existence and ministry represented an instance of diversity of ministry in the Church, a diversity willed by the Spirit and communicated in the *cheirothesia*.

Patristic Testimony of Diversity and Complementarity

Concerning patristic testimony, one can cite, among others, Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Cyprian of Carthage, Augustine of Hippo, to mention but these. In theirs, and in the writings of many other early Christians—which, in a way, enable us to feel the pulse of patristic ecclesiology—the distinction between the hierarchy and the plebs goes hand-in-hand with an appeal for harmony between the two.

Clement of Rome

Presupposed in Clement of Rome’s appeal for harmony within the Church in Corinth is a distinction between the clergy and plebs. “Let us reverence

¹¹ Ibid., 212.

the Lord Jesus, whose blood was shed for us. Let us respect those in authority, let us honor the presbyters.”¹² For Clement of Rome, therefore, the way to address the misgivings of the people toward their clergy was neither by erosion nor by usurpation of their authority. The solution he proposes would seem least attractive in an era of media-inspired perception of ecclesial life. But the challenge of contemporary Christians is to rediscover the wisdom in Clement’s words: “Let us put on unity of mind, thinking humble thoughts, exercising self-control, keeping ourselves far from all backbiting and slander, being righteous in deed, and not in word only.”¹³

Ignatius of Antioch

The words of Ignatius of Antioch’s letters on the way to martyrdom ought not to be overlooked in a discussion such as this. They not only point to the existence of a hierarchy, they call for communion between the hierarchy and the people. To the Trallians he wrote, speaking of the bishop as one who is in the place of Christ:

Your submission to your bishop, who is in the place of Jesus Christ, shows me that you are not living as men usually do but in the manner of Jesus Christ himself. . . . Thus one thing is necessary, and you already observe it, that you do nothing without your bishop; indeed, be subject to the clergy as well, seeing in them the apostles of Jesus Christ our hope, for if we live in him we shall be found in him. . . .

Similarly, all should respect the deacons as Jesus Christ, just as all should regard the bishop as the image of the Father, and the clergy as God’s senate and the college of the apostles. Without these three orders you cannot begin to speak of a Church. . . .

And so I strongly urge you, not I so much as the love of Jesus Christ, to be nourished exclusively on Christian fare, abstaining from the alien food that is heresy. And this you will do if you are neither arrogant nor cut off from God, from Jesus Christ, and from the bishop and the teachings of the apostles. Whoever is within the sanctuary is pure; but whoever is not is unclean. That is to say, whoever acts apart from the bishop and the clergy and the deacons is not pure in his conscience.¹⁴

To the Smyrneans he said: “Make sure that no step affecting the Church is ever taken by anyone without the bishop’s sanction. . . . Where the bishop is to be seen, there let all his people be; just as wherever Jesus Christ is present, we have the catholic Church.”¹⁵ To the Philadelphians he said:

¹² Clement of Rome, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, no. 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, no. 30.

¹⁴ Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Trallians*, nos. 2, 3, 6.

¹⁵ Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrneans*, no. 8.

You are my abiding and unshakable joy, especially if your members remain united with the bishop and with his presbyters and deacons, all appointed in accordance with the mind of Christ who by his own will has strengthened them in the firmness which the Spirit gives.

I know that this bishop has obtained his ministry, which serves the community, neither by his own efforts, nor from men nor even out of vainglory, but from the love of God the Father and of the Lord Jesus Christ. . . .

As sons of the light of truth, flee divisions and evil doctrines; where your shepherd is, follow him as his flock. . . .

For all who belong to God and Jesus Christ are with the bishop; all who repent and return to the unity of the Church will also belong to God, that they may live according to Jesus Christ. Do not be deceived, my brothers. If anyone follows a schismatic, he will not obtain the inheritance of God's kingdom; if anyone lives by an alien teaching, he does not assent to the passion of the Lord.

Be careful, therefore, to take part only in the one Eucharist; for there is only one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ and one cup to unite us with his blood, one altar and one bishop with the presbyters and deacons, who are his fellow servants. Then, whatever you do, you will do according to God.¹⁶

Care must be taken not to read these words in a one-sided manner. For Ignatius does not just appeal for harmony with the bishop, he also points to the qualities of a good bishop. A good bishop imitates the gentleness of the living God.

I am deeply impressed by his gentleness, and by his silence, he is more effective than the empty talkers. He is in harmony with the commandments as is a lute with its strings. I call him blessed, then, for his sentiments toward God, since I know these to be virtuous and perfect, and for his stability and calm, in which he imitates the gentleness of the living God.¹⁷

And there is a more explicit statement from Ignatius on what is expected of clerics:

It is fitting also that the deacons, as being [the ministers] of the mysteries of Jesus Christ, should in every respect be pleasing to all. For they are not ministers of meat and drink, but servants of the Church of God. They are bound, therefore, to avoid all grounds of accusation [against them], as they would do fire.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Philadelphians*, nos. 1–4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 1.

¹⁸ Ignatius, *Letter to Trallians*, no. 2.

Cyprian of Carthage

As for Cyprian of Carthage, even as his letters manifest the existence of a hierarchy in the Church of his time, he never ceased to make the point that communion with the hierarchy was essential for the life of the Church. Exhorting Maximus, Nicostratus, and other Roman confessors who had entered into schism, he pleaded for unity:

[I]t weighs me down and saddens me, and the intolerable grief of a smitten, almost prostrate, spirit seizes me, when I find that you there, contrary to ecclesiastical order, contrary to evangelical law, contrary to the unity of the Catholic institution, had consented that another bishop should be made. That is what is neither right nor allowable to be done; that another church should be set up; that Christ's members should be torn asunder; that the one mind and body of the Lord's flock should be lacerated by a divided emulation. I entreat that in you, at all events, that unlawful rending of our brotherhood may not continue; but remembering both your confession and the divine tradition, you may return to the Mother whence you have gone forth; whence you came to the glory of confession with the rejoicing of the same Mother. And think not that you are thus maintaining the gospel of Christ when you separate yourselves from the flock of Christ, and from his peace and concord; since it is more fitting for glorious and good soldiers to sit down within their own camp, and so placed within, to manage and provide for those things which are to be dealt with in common. For as our unanimity and concord ought by no means to be divided, and because we cannot forsake the Church and go outside her to come to you, we beg and entreat you with what exhortations we can, rather to return to the Church your Mother, and to our brotherhood. I bid you, dearest brethren, ever heartily farewell.¹⁹

When these confessors returned to ecclesial communion, Cyprian wrote a congratulatory letter to them explaining that while the imperfections of the Church might provoke and explain schism, they do not justify it.

For although there seem to be tares in the Church, yet neither our faith nor our charity ought to be hindered so that because we see that there are tares in the Church we ourselves should withdraw from the Church: we ought only to labor that we may be wheat, that when the wheat shall begin to be gathered into the Lord's barns, we may receive fruit for our labor and work. The apostle in his epistle says, "In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and of earth, and some to honor and some to dishonor." Let us strive, dearest brethren, and labor as much as we possibly can, that we may be vessels of gold or

¹⁹ Cyprian of Carthage, *Letter* 43.

silver. But to the Lord alone, it is granted to break the vessels of earth, to whom also is given the rod of iron. The servant cannot be greater than his lord, nor may anyone claim to himself what the Father has given to the Son alone, so as to think that he can take the fan for winnowing and purging the threshing floor, or can separate by human judgment all the tares from the wheat. That is a proud obstinacy and a sacrilegious presumption which a depraved madness assumes to itself. And while some are always assuming to themselves more dominion than meek justice demands, they perish from the Church; and while they insolently extol themselves, blinded by their own swelling, they lose the light of truth. For which reason we also, keeping moderation, and considering the Lord's balances, and thinking of the love and mercy of God the Father, have long and carefully pondered with ourselves, and have weighed what was to be done with due moderation.²⁰

For Cyprian, the Church's unity is never apart from the bishop. Consequently, he had this to say in his letter to Florentius Puppianus: "the bishop is in the Church, and the Church in the bishop. . . . If someone is not with the bishop, he is not in the Church."²¹ The same Cyprian never neglected the role of the laity in the governance of the Church.

I made a rule for myself, from the beginning of my episcopate, to decide nothing without the counsel [of the presbyters and deacons] and without the vote of the people, according to my personal opinion . . . not only with my colleagues but with all the people.²²

In other words, in the ecclesiology of Cyprian, episcopal authority was not to be exercised in a way that disregarded the fundamental dignity and equality of the baptized. The episcopate is not for the promotion of clericalism but at the service of the communion of charisms and ministries that that Church is.

Augustine of Hippo

The testimony of Clement, of Ignatius, and of Cyprian ought to be sufficient. But it would not be out of place to give the last word of patristic testimony to Augustine whose recognition of the sameness of dignity and

²⁰ Cyprian of Carthage, *Letter* 50.

²¹ Cyprian of Carthage, *Letter* 66. It is not a question of bishops living as monads but of bishops living in episcopal solidarity. Hence, Cyprian wrote: "There is among the bishops only one single Church, only one single soul and one single heart. . . . Through the institution by Christ, there is only one unique Church spread throughout the entire world in several members, one unique episcopate represented in a multitude of bishops united among themselves" (*ibid.*).

²² Cyprian of Carthage, *Letter* 14.

difference of roles among the baptized can be summarized in this brief but famous quotation:

I must distinguish carefully between two aspects of the role the Lord has given me, a role based on the Lord's greatness rather than on my own merit. The first aspect is that I am a Christian; the second, that I am a leader. I am a Christian for my own sake; the fact that I am a Christian is to my own advantage, but I am a leader for your own advantage.²³

The bishop of Hippo was not ignorant of the duties of a good bishop. "In addition to the fact that I am a Christian and must give God an account of my life, I as a leader must give him an account of my stewardship as well."²⁴

The Church Fathers referred to in this section of the essay show from their writings that the fact that the Church is a communion of members endowed with fundamental equality and dignity does not remove the diversity of ministries in the Church. Going by the testimony of the New Testament, such diversity, rather than negate communion, is itself rooted in and nourished by communion. In the midst of this diversity, to regulate it, is the gift of authority. This will now be considered.²⁵

New Testament Testimony Concerning the Gift of Authority in Ecclesial Communion²⁶

The place of the gift of authority in the Church of the New Testament enables us to grasp the New Testament testimony of the diversity and complementarity of charisms in the Church which underlies Pope John Paul II's vision of the lay faithful in the communion that the Church is. Using the intuitions of the Apostle Paul concerning the pneumatological *modus operandi* in the Church, and its application in the ecclesiology of Vatican II, Pope John Paul II, in the postsynodal exhortation *Christifideles Laici* wrote:

Ecclesial communion is more precisely likened to an "organic" communion, analogous to that of a living and functioning body. In fact, at one and the same time, it is characterized by a *diversity* and a *complementarity*

²³ Augustine, *Sermon* 46, 2.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See the discussion of the distinction between the clergy and the laity in Tillard, *Church of Churches*, 211–23.

²⁶ An earlier version of this section of the essay was presented at a study session of the Nigerian Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission at the Jasper Akinola Centre, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria, on July 21, 2004.

of vocations and states of life, of ministries, of charisms and responsibilities. Because of this diversity and complementarity, every member of the lay faithful is seen *in relation to the whole body* and offers a totally unique contribution on behalf of the whole body.

St. Paul insists in a particular way on the organic communion of the Mystical Body of Christ. We can hear his rich teaching echoed in the following synthesis from the council: "Jesus Christ"—we read in the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*—"by communicating his Spirit to his brothers and sisters, called together from all peoples, made them mystically into his own body. In that body, the life of Christ is communicated to those who believe. . . . As all the members of the human body, though they are many, form one body, so also are the Faithful in Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12:12). Also, in the building up of Christ's body there is a diversity of members and functions. There is only one Spirit who, according to his own richness and the necessities of service, distributes his different gifts for the welfare of the Church (cf. 1 Cor 12:1–22). Among these gifts comes in the first place the grace given to the apostles to whose authority the Spirit himself subjects even those who are endowed with charisms (cf. 1 Cor 14)."²⁷

There are two points I would like to make here. First, the authority of Christ, which comes from God, has been given by Christ to his messengers in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Secondly, this authority, ordered by love and to love in *koinonia*, keeps the Church in communion with her apostolic origins. The Church is a pilgrim Church on her way to the *eschaton*. In her pilgrimage, she needs to remember her apostolic origins if she is to arrive at her eschatological goal. The Spirit, who reminds her of all things, uses the gift of authority to guide her on this pilgrimage. The Spirit is the memory of the Church through the gift of authority in her pilgrimage through history. The alternative would be a Church that goes off the right path, incapable of protecting the dignity of the baptized.

To speak of authority as a gift (*charisma*), as Pope John Paul II does following the Apostle Paul, is to speak of authority as a manifestation of the Spirit. This is the case because every gift is a manifestation of the Spirit. The following feature in what could be called the Pauline inventory of charisms (cf. 1 Cor 12:4–11): utterance expressing wisdom (*logos sophia*), utterance expressing knowledge (*logos gnoseos*), faith (*pistis*), healing (*iamatos*), working of miracles (*energumata dunameon*), prophecy (*propheteia*), discernment of spirits (*diakriseis pneumaton*), different tongues (*gene glosson*), interpretation of tongues (*hemeneia glosson*).

²⁷ John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, no. 20, original emphasis; see also Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 7.

It would seem the gift of authority does not feature on this list. But, in fact, it does. Even though the word used here is not *exousia*, what Paul refers to as “discernment of spirits” (*diakriseis pneumaton*) indicates an essential function of authority. The ministry of authority in the New Testament Church is the regulation of charisms through discernment of spirits in order to ensure that ecclesial communion (*koinonia*) is preserved. The *koinonia* is the one body of Christ. That is where the analogy of the body that Paul uses comes in. For just as the different parts of the body keep the body together, the different gifts keep the one body of Christ together. “The particular manifestation of the Spirit granted to each one is to be used for the general good” (1 Cor 12:7). If it is granted that there is a reference to authority in the expression *diakriseis pneumaton*, which features on Paul’s list of charisms, then it can be said that in the indissociable ecclesiology and pneumatology of 1 Corinthians, authority features as a particular manifestation of the Spirit which regulates other particular manifestations of the Spirit. Authority is for the discernment of spirits. Therefore, one may further conclude, authority, like any of the gifts mentioned by Paul, has been given for the edification of the body of Christ. The edification of the body of Christ is in the attainment of the general good of the Church, and the general good of the Church is *koinonia*.

The word *koinonia* is somewhat loosely translated as “fellowship.” But it is by far richer in meaning. Its rich meaning is discovered when its succinct description in Acts 2:42, 4:32–35, and 5:12–16 is given due consideration. The nature of this *koinonia* involves more than gathering together to pray. It necessarily involves fidelity to the teaching of the apostles (*te didache ton apostolon*) and breaking of bread (*klasis tou artou*). The general good of the Church is found in the *koinonia* described in these words. That this is so is discernible in the way Paul orders every gift to love. Of all the gifts, he singles out faith, hope, and love, and of the three, he proclaims love as the greatest (cf. 1 Cor 13:13). It would seem therefore that, for Paul, authority regulates the charisms, and the charism of authority is itself regulated by love to which it is subordinated.

If the gift of authority is to be seen and received this way, that is, as itself regulated by love, then it must be seen as the authority of Christ himself. The one who has authority in the Church has it only because of Christ to whom the authority actually belongs. Rudolf Schnackenburg expresses this very well by way of a comparison with the concept and exercise of authority in Judaism:

The hierarchical direction of the primitive Church can in no case be mistaken for the Jewish hierarchy. In the latter after the end of the

Monarchy, the high priest occupied the summit as representing God's authority and under him the chief priests held the leading offices in the Temple; he was also president of the Sanhedrin which represented the assembly of the people as highest council and court of justice and in which, once again, the Scribes occupied a prominent position as professional interpreters of the Torah. In contrast to this, what is new in the Christian community is the absolute authority of Christ. For the primitive Church it is basic that Jesus as God's eschatological envoy authoritatively proclaims the will of God and that with his exaltation to the right hand of God, all power was conferred on him (Mt 28:18). Every exercise of office or service in the Church only takes place in virtue of the power (Mt 16:19; 18:18; Jn 21:15, 17) given to those he sent (Jn 20:21). For this there is no privilege of birth (as with the high priest), or of intellectual formation (as with the Scribes), but vocation, mission, and endowment with grace from on high are alone decisive. Christ "gives" his Church the various men who are entrusted with services, who work together in building up "his body" (Eph 4:11f). In contradistinction to the Jewish hierarchy, no one of himself has any claim to an office, and no suitability based on human qualities is decisive, but all qualification comes from God (2 Cor 3:5f). In the early Church this qualification is often produced by the Holy Spirit (extraordinary charismata) and sometimes made known by prophecy (cf. Acts 13:2; 1 Tim 1:18; 4:14); but even *with the imposition of hands* (cf. 1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6) it is always conferred by the Holy Spirit (charismatic grace of office).²⁸

The *exousia* which comes from God belongs to Jesus. It is because his envoys continue his mission that they share in it.²⁹

Authority and Fidelity

Fidelity to the teaching of the apostles was and remains an essential feature of *koinonia* because of the privileged witnesses that the apostles were. The criterion put forward by Peter at the election of the replacement of Judas is indicative of the type of witness that apostles must be. The replacement was to be chosen "out of the men who have been with us the whole time that the Lord Jesus was living with us, from the time when John was baptizing until the day when he was taken up from us—one must be appointed to serve with us as a witness to his resurrection" (Acts 1:21–22). This of course raises the question of the apostolic credentials of Paul who was not one of those who accompanied Jesus during his earthly ministry. Here I note, as Tillard pointed out that "however secure

²⁸ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Church in the New Testament* (London and Turnbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1974), 126–27, emphasis added.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 22–35.

his [Paul's] investiture is, the witness of anyone at all who has not 'accompanied' Jesus before the Cross (Acts 1:21–22) needs to find a confirmation in what the witnesses of the facts in question certify."³⁰ Paul himself refers to the tradition he received from those who were authoritative witnesses. One can make further reference to Tillard:

It is through the apostolic witness, conveyed through the power of the Spirit, that we know what happened to Jesus, what God accomplished in him, the words of the Lord himself which permit us to understand why. Salvation is then recognized as a gift not coming from a vague and abstract source but from the Father in and through Jesus Christ, faithful servant of the Good News of God. This relationship to the *acta et dicta* of Christ Jesus is essential. It is fundamentally for this reason that the Church is said to be founded on the apostles (Eph 2:20).³¹

The gift of authority has been given to the Church so that the Church may remain faithful to its apostolic origins. The role of authority is to ensure that what is presented as a manifestation of the Spirit conforms with the teaching of the apostles (*te didache ton apostolon*), which is essential to *koinonia*. It is helpful to recall one of the issues that occasioned the writing of the first letter to the Corinthians. The issue of charisms was paramount. Paul wrote to a Church that was charismatic but chaotic precisely because its members ignored the reason why they were given charisms: not for personal aggrandizement but for the good of the Church. The gift of authority was given to the Church to ensure the integral transmission and faithful transmission of the *didache ton apostolon* without which there is no communion. Authority is the minister of communion by being minister of apostolic teaching. The breakdown of authority in Corinth meant that there was no longer regulation of charisms through the discernment of spirits. Such breakdown ultimately leads to breaking of communion in a schism precisely because, in the absence of authoritative discernment, one can no longer guarantee the Church's fidelity to the teaching of the apostles. Where there is schism because there is no fidelity to apostolic teaching it is arguable if one can speak of a valid Eucharist, the sacramental manifestation of *koinonia*.

Conclusion

The charism of the lay faithful is not to erode authority in the Church, and the charism of authority is not to stifle the Spirit in the lay faithful.

³⁰ Tillard, *Church of Churches*, 176.

³¹ Ibid.

When, to warn the Church against a tendency that has been referred to as “clericalization” of the lay faithful, Pope John Paul II speaks of “a diversity and complementarity of vocations and states in life, of ministries, of charisms and responsibilities,” he has behind him the weight of conciliar, patristic, and apostolic authorities. These authorities point to the existence of diversity of charisms and ministries in the Church, the differentiation between the clergy and the lay faithful, and, one may say, ipso facto, the existence of the hierarchy. The Spirit, who is Principle of baptismal regeneration, confers on us the dignity of God’s children in the Son. One and the same Spirit is Giver of charisms, ministries, and roles in their diversity and hierarchy. The imagery of the vine and the branches points to the communion, the vital union that exists or ought to exist between the branches and the vine. And because the branches, though different, draw life from the same vine, there is no room for dichotomy or opposition between the lay faithful and the hierarchy in Catholic ecclesiology. The lay faithful and the hierarchy are not to be seen as opposition parties. Christ did not found the Church to be a dictatorship of clerics. Neither did he found the Church to be an ochlocracy of the laity. I believe John Cardinal Newman was proposing a midway between dictatorship and ochlocracy when he wrote about a *conspiratio pastorum ac fidelium* in his essay *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Christian Doctrine*.

Recognizing that the Holy Spirit, who is there to guide those who exercise authority in the Church, is the same Spirit given to all the members of Christ’s faithful in Baptism, the hierarchy and the lay faithful can breathe the same Spirit together, ministering the Spirit to each other. The challenge is to cooperate with the Spirit in order to have a leadership that listens in a community that prays. To respond to this challenge, competence, a forthrightness that does not betray confidentiality, a humility that respects the dignity and charisms of the lay faithful, and, of course, holiness must become prerequisites for leadership in the Church. Lack of such qualities in leaders is in itself a threat to ecclesial communion. Taking these qualities seriously in the formation of priests and in the selection of those to lead parishes and local churches will go a long way in helping to build a Church in which pastors are once again trusted by lay faithful who no longer rely exclusively on the secular media in shaping their perception of the Church.

The ecclesiology of communion at Vatican II comes to fore in the exhortation *Christifideles Laici*. Pope John Paul II’s description of the laity in the exhortation is in substantial concordance with Vatican II ecclesiology insofar as the lay faithful are to be seen within the *koinonia*. In the

final analysis, John Paul II and recent indices of friction and mistrust between the lay faithful and the hierarchy invite the Church to prayerfully reread the ecclesiology of Vatican II. In this ecclesiology, the affirmation of the dignity and vocation of the laity should never be misconstrued as abdication of pastoral responsibility by the hierarchy. Charisms do not negate but affirm one another. Pastors, theologians, and lay faithful will need to pray, hope, and work for the reception of the Church that the Spirit led Vatican II to give us—a Church in which the charism of pastors and the charism of the lay faithful affirm each other, because the hierarchy and the lay faithful affirm each other in whatever is good for the edification of the Church, a Church of intimate communion and active collaboration, not a Church of confusion of roles, sterile conflicts, and debilitating confrontation. As Tillard points out, the ordained, in the exercise of their ministry

are not called by their own *munus*, to be sufficient for it. Today as always—but undoubtedly more than before—their ministry can and must be accomplished only in the midst of a symphony of other ministries or services of the gospel. Such is the foundation on which one must always build. It is a question of entering into this dynamism of *communion* of functions.³²

I would add that it is for this reason that the dignity of those who exercise the ministry is in their service of communion, not in lording it over the people in the abuse of their clerical status. In this regard, one must not fail to recall the exhortation given to them in 1 Peter 5:1–4:

I urge the elders among you, as a fellow elder myself and as a witness to the sufferings of Christ, and as one who is to have a share in the glory that is to be revealed: give a shepherd's care to the flock of God that is entrusted to you: watch over it, not simply as a duty but gladly, as God wants; not for sordid money, but because you are eager to do it. Do not lord it over the group which is in your charge, but be example for the flock. When the chief shepherd appears, you will be given the unfading crown of glory.

The Church in our time needs to reconnect with the apostolic and patristic roots of Vatican II ecclesiology, which John Paul II's ecclesiology represents. The Church in the twenty-first century, like the Church at any period of her pilgrimage through history, must remain faithful to her apostolic origins so as not to undergo an eschatological distortion of her

³² Ibid., 219.

figure. To paraphrase Yves Congar, one of the theological motivators of the council, the apostolicity of the Church is not just in view of her origins but also in view of her goal. The Church to be presented to the Lord at the Parousia, even though she would have passed through all kinds of intellectual and cultural climatic conditions before the day on which his name will be written on the foreheads of those who have been regenerated in the waters of Baptism, ought not to be different from the Church he himself founded on the foundation of the apostles. **N-V**