

ECCLESIOLOGY – A New Approach

presented by Bernie Rodel to the Archdiocesan Synod Planning Team on January 14, 2009

Introduction:

A statement by Hans Kung (1968): “.....an absence of intellectual leadership in the church on the part of hierarchy.”

Question: How many books or journal articles on ecclesiology have you read which were written or published by our bishops throughout the US?

Vatican II document, *Gaudium et Spes*, directs us to address the contemporary world, to make faith intelligible in terms that it can understand. The substance of the Gospel needs to take on the form of the local culture.

Current Crisis:

“The cleavage between ecclesiastical institution and theological reflection.” (E. Schillebeeckx, OP)

Application:

Current assessment of ecclesiology based upon the behavior of the hierarchy of may be termed “church-centered.”

- Promotes predominantly, if not exclusively, the welfare and triumph of the church as an organization.
- Everything is made to serve the church’s extension and influence. (e.g. evangelization)
- Church-centered ecclesiology throws some light on the American bishops’ power abuses through which they attempted to cover up their priests’ sexual misdeeds.

- Church-centered ecclesiology “enabled” these random behaviors of bishops.
- Bishops were totally confounded why their priests and laity were angry at them since “they had simply acted for the good of the church”.

A New Way of Being Church (Conversion of Asian Catholic Churches – an evolutionary process spanning 3 decades: from the foundation of the Federation of Asian Bishop’s Conferences in 1970 to the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Asia which met in Rome from April 19 through May 14, 1998.)

-Move from a church-centered to a “kingdom- centered” ecclesiology!

- In this kingdom-centered ecclesiology the church is no longer considered to be the pinnacle or at the very center of Christian life.
- In this kingdom-centered ecclesiology the church is moved from the center to the periphery and from the top to the bottom.
- In this kingdom-centered ecclesiology the **REIGN OF GOD** is the center around which everything in the church revolves and to which everything is subordinated.
- The reign of God (and not the church) is now installed as the ultimate goal of all the activities within and without the church.

- In kingdom-centered ecclesiology both what the church is and what it does are defined by the reign of God and not the other way around.
- The only reason now for the church to exist is to serve the reign of God, that is, to help bring about what has been referred to as “kingdom values.”
- These are the values that the church must promote and not its own self-aggrandizement or reputation or institutional survival.
- Sacred Scripture and the reign (kingdom or rule) of God:
 - o The word church (ecclesia) occurs only twice in the Gospels (Matthew 16:18 & 18:17)
 - o The expression “kingdom of God” is found 31 times in Luke, 14 times in Mark, and 3 times in Matthew, and the equivalent expression “kingdom of heaven” is found 30 times in Matthew.

What are these kingdom values? What does the kingdom of God stand for?

- In a nutshell the reign of God is nothing less than God’s saving presence in Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, a presence that brings about gratuitous forgiveness and reconciliation and restores universal justice and peace between God and humanity, among humans themselves, and between humanity and the cosmos.

- These gifts of forgiveness and reconciliation, of justice and peace, are extended to all without any distinction but preferentially to the poor, namely, to those who lack the minimum conditions required for a decent human life, whose dignity and rights have been denied, who have been oppressed and abused in any way by authorities, secular or religious.

A kingdom-centered church must be characterized by the following five features:

- 1) The church must be seen primarily as “a communion of communities”, where laity, religious and clergy recognize and accept each other as sisters and brothers.
- 2) In this ecclesiology there needs be an explicit and effective recognition of fundamental equality among all members of the local church. (All authority must be a modality which includes collegiality, co-responsibility and accountability to all members of the church.)
- 3) The third characteristic of a new way of being church (“discipleship of equals” - #2) is the participatory and collaborative nature of all ministeries in the church. (It is participatory since the gifts of the Holy Spirit are gifts to all the faithful.)
- 4) The fourth characteristic is a dialogical spirit. The primary task of the church is the proclamation of the Gospel by way of dialogue. (Ecumenism)

5) The last feature of a new way of being church is prophecy. The church is a leaven of transformation in this world and serves as a prophetic sign daring to point beyond this world to the Kingdom that is yet to come.

Now let's review some of the issues:

Inculturation

Pluralism/Diversity

Management vs. Leadership

Theology “from below” vs. Theology “from above”

Church-centered ecclesiology vs. kingdom-centered ecclesiology

Excommunication