

THE SUPPRESSION OF COLLEGIALITY JOHN PAUL II

In describing the nature of the authority of the church the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) reintroduced the notion of collegiality, a concept rooted in the history of the Catholic Church. The principle of collegiality states that the pope together with the bishops govern the Church. (*Lumen Gentium*, the *Constitution on the Church*, no. 8, hereafter cite *LG*). Just as Peter and the apostles constituted one apostolic college, so the pope, the successor of Peter, and the bishops, the successors of the apostles, are joined together. (*LG*, 22). *Lumen Gentium* does reaffirm the primacy of the pope who, as the Vicar of Christ, has full, supreme, and universal power over the Church. (*LG*, 22). Yet, *Lumen Gentium* also clearly states that the bishops, if they are in communion with the pope, do exercise, “supreme and full power over the universal Church.” (*LG*, 22).

Examples of the exercise of the principle of collegiality in the post-Vatican II church can be found in two pastoral letters presented by the U.S. Conference of Catholic bishops in the 1980’s. The first was *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response*, May 3, 1983, which summarized the church’s teaching on war, peace, and nuclear deterrence. The second, dated November 13, 1986, *Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social teaching and the U.S. Economy*, summarized the Church’s teaching on economic and social justice issues. Basking in the spirit of collegiality, the U.S. Bishops were given a wide range of freedom in compiling and editing these two pastoral letters. In order to understand the context of these pastoral letters it must be understood that they were written in the spirit of Vatican II’s call for the Catholic Church to address the signs of the times. They were attempts on the part of the bishops to apply the traditional teaching of the church to new and contemporary questions and issues. In the “Summary” of their letter, *The Challenge of Peace*, the U. S. bishops state, “We wish to explore

and explain the resources of the moral-religious teaching and apply it to specific questions of our day.” (U.S. Bishops Conference, *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response*, National Conference of Catholic Bishops: Washington, D.C., May 3, 1983, i). The U.S. bishops saw this letter as a legitimate exercise of the authority granted to them through the principle of collegiality.

However, even before *The Challenge of Peace* was finished Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later to become Benedict XVI), prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the time, invited several members of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to Rome to discuss the document. The meeting was held in Rome from January 18-19, 1983 with Cardinal Ratzinger as chair. At this meeting Cardinal Ratzinger presented his view on the authority of episcopal conferences. He stated that national conferences of bishops as such do not have a *mandatum docendi* (a mandate to teach) and that the teaching authority of bishops belongs to the individual bishops or to the universal college of bishops in communion with the pope. (Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., “The Teaching Authority of Episcopal Conferences,” *Theological Studies* (Vol 63, 2002), 476, hereafter cited Sullivan, “Teaching Authority”). See also, “Vatican Synthesis,” *Origins* 12 (April 7, 1983), 692).

Fifteen years later on May 21, 1998 Pope John Paul II addressed the issue of the nature of the authority of episcopal conferences and their role in the church in the apostolic letter, *Apostolos Suos*. (John Paul II, Apostolic Letter issued “*Motu Proprio*,” *On the Theological and Juridical Nature of Episcopal Conferences*, Rome: May 21, 1998). Although *Apostolos Suos* did not explicitly resolve the question of the precise nature of the authority of national episcopal conferences, it did recognize that episcopal conferences do have a legitimate teaching role in the church. *Apostolos Suos* also adds some new norms for national episcopal conferences which

place limitations on the bishops' exercise of their authority. Section IV of *Apostolos Suos* lists four norms that national episcopal conferences must follow in order to proclaim and publish their statements. The most important of these is the first which states,

In order that the doctrinal declarations of the Conference of Bishops referred to in No. 22 of the present Letter may constitute authentic magisterium and be published in the name of the Conference itself, they must be unanimously approved by the Bishops who are members, or receive the *recognitio* of the Apostolic See if approved in plenary assembly by at least two thirds of the Bishops belonging to the Conference and having a deliberative vote. (*Apostolos Suos*, Section IV, Art. 1).

The practical difficulties involved in fulfilling the two requirements of this norm make it almost impossible for episcopal conferences to come up with an acceptable text for publication. On the requirement of unanimity Francis A. Sullivan states that it would be highly unlikely for a large group of bishops, who are used to making decisions for their own dioceses, to decide a controversial issue in a way that would satisfy every single bishop. (Sullivan, "Teaching Authority," 486). The second requirement of *recognitio* by the Holy See, which comes into play if the bishops do not reach unanimity, also places obstacles that make it difficult for national conferences of bishops to operate efficiently and effectively. Presumably, the burden of reviewing the statements of episcopal conferences throughout the world would fall on the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Given the number of dioceses throughout the world this process would take a long time and the bishops conferences would have to wait a significant amount of time before receiving recognition of their statements from the Holy See. In the face of objections from the Holy See the U.S. bishop's pastoral letter on women and sexism in the Church was not approved at the November 1992 national bishops' meeting because it did not get a two-thirds majority favorable vote. The letter did pass with 137 bishops in favor and 110 against.

As limiting as these two requirements are, Francis Sullivan thinks that *Apostolos Suos* might present an even greater challenge to the authority of episcopal conferences. He thinks that the two conditions of unanimity and recognition seem to imply that an episcopal conference is not an intermediate subject of teaching authority. (Sullivan, “Teaching Authority,” 491). He adds, “In my opinion, it is Ratzinger’s view that has prevailed.” (Sullivan, “Teaching Authority,” 491). At least, implicitly *Apostolos Suos* seems to accept the view that national episcopal conferences do not have any *de jure* collegial teaching authority. They receive their authority from Rome or from the individual bishops. The bishop’s collegial authority is exercised only when the universal college of bishops teach in communion with the pope. *Apostolos Suos* also suggests that the national conferences of bishops receive whatever authority they have from the Holy See. (*Apostolos Suos*, Section II, # 13). Such a view is consistent with John Paul II’s attempt to center all church authority in the papacy and the Roman Curia, the Roman magisterium.

In a commentary on the sexual abuse crisis published posthumously in the *National Catholic Reporter* in 2019 Eugene Kennedy claims that collegiality “survived in name only” under Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. (Eugene Cullen Kennedy, “Under Hierarchical Culture, Abuse Crisis Will Remain with Us,” Part II, *National Catholic Reporter*, (June 28 – July 11, 2019), 5). According to Kennedy both popes cooperated in suppressing the implementation of collegiality because it was a threat to maintaining their view of the Church as a strict monarchical hierarchical institution. (Kennedy, “Hierarchical Culture,” 5). Through their collaboration on the document *Apostolos Suos* in 1998, John Paul II and then Cardinal Ratzinger reduced the national conferences of bishops to dependent groups who could no longer initiate or write pastoral letters unless they first submitted them to Rome for approval. (Kennedy,

“Hierarchical Culture,” 5). Kennedy goes on to maintain that this unhealthy suppression of the collegiality of the bishops is connected to the sexual abuse problem because it “preserved and strengthened the centrality and control of the Roman hierarchs and the power of the Curia over the entire Church.” (Kennedy, “Hierarchical Culture,” 5).