

The limits of the papacy

During the preparation of the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Pope Paul VI proposed that the constitution's discussion of papal primacy include the affirmation that the pope is "accountable to the Lord alone." This suggestion was rejected by the Council's Theological Commission, which wrote that "the Roman Pontiff is also bound to revelation itself, to the fundamental structure of the Church, to the sacraments, to the definitions of earlier councils, and other obligations too numerous to mention." Pope Paul quietly dropped his proposal.

Yet the image persists that the Catholic Church is a kind of global corporation, with the pope as CEO, the bishops as branch managers, and your parish priest as the local salesman. And according to that image, the pope not only knows what's going on all the way down the line, he gives orders that are immediately obeyed all the way down the line. Or, to vary the misimpression, the church is like the United States Marine Corps - there, at least according to legend, when the commandant issues an order, everyone from the highest-ranking four-star to the lowliest Parris Island recruit staples a salute to his forehead and does what he's told.

This distorted and distorting image of the pope as dictatorial CEO or Marine commandant is, admittedly, reinforced by the language of the Code of Canon Law. Thus Canon 331 states that the "Bishop of the Church of Rome ... has supreme, full, immediate and universal ordinary power in the Church, and he can always freely exercise that power." Yet, while, both theology and law tells us that the pope enjoys the fullness of executive, legislative and judicial authority in the church, his exercise of that power is circumscribed by any number of factors.

It is circumscribed by the authority and prerogatives of local bishops, According to the teaching of Vatican II, bishops are not simply branch-managers of Catholic Church, Inc.; rather, they are the heads of local churches with both the authority and the responsibility to govern them. Moreover, the pope, according to the council, is to govern the Church with the College of Bishops who, with him and under him, share in responsibility for the well-being of the entire People of God, not only for their own local churches.

The pope's capacity for governance is also shaped by the quality of his closest associates, and by the accuracy and timeliness of the information he receives from the Roman Curia via the nuncios and apostolic delegates who represent the Holy See and the pope around the world. An example of how this fact of ecclesiastical life can impede a pope's ability to respond promptly to situations comes from the American crisis of clerical sexual abuse and episcopal misgovernance in 2002. Because of grossly inadequate reporting from the apostolic nunciature in Washington between January and April 2002 - when the firestorm was at its hottest - John Paul II was about three months behind the news curve in mid-April 2002; what appeared (and was often presented by the press) as papal uninterest in the U.S. crisis was in fact a significant time-lag in the information-flow.

Papal governance can also be undermined by inept subordinates. Thus the image of an uninterested John Paul II was reinforced in 2002 by Cardinal Dario Castrillon's disastrous presentation of the pope's annual Holy Thursday letter to priests that year, during which Castrillon blew off questions about the U.S. crisis by saying that John Paul had more important things to worry about, like peace in the Middle East.

These very real human limits on the exercise of papal power seem almost impossible for some editors and reporters - and indeed for some Catholics - to grasp. Yet the fact remains that the overwhelming responsibility for turning the scandal of clerical sexual abuse into a full-blown church-wide crisis lays at the feet of irresponsible local bishops, and unfortunately of bishops who bought the conventional wisdom about therapeutic "cures" for sexual predators. That underscores the imperative of getting episcopal appointments right and of removing bishops whose failures destroy their capacity to govern: see "Ireland today, Catholic Church in."

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