

Changing Our “Mentality” about “Church”

Michael H. Crosby

On May 26, 2009 Pope Benedict XVI gave a significant address on the nature of the Church. It offered an approach to “church” that demands “a change of mentality,” he said, if all the baptized—“from the Pope to the last child” will “be the church.”

The Pope’s words could not come at a more important time. In the West, in places like the United States, the Roman Church is experiencing a rapid hemorrhaging of its members, especially the young. His reflection also offers some ray of hope to Catholic groups like Voice of the Faithful, Future Church and Call to Action whose mantra about being “the church” seem to be less and less important to more and more priests and bishops.

The context for the Pope’s address was a May 26-29 conference convened at St. John Lateran for the Diocese of Rome. Its theme was “Church Membership and Pastoral Co-responsibility.”

In his remarks the Pope reiterated the “boundaries that exist objectively between the hierarchical ministry and the responsibilities of the lay faithful of the church.” At the same time, however, he highlighted the need for the laity to recognize their responsibility to “be the church.” He said that this demanded the realization that evangelization is not “just for a few, but for all the baptized.” In other words, in a church becoming increasingly “either/or,” rather than both/and, the Pope’s remarks acknowledge the need for a better balance between the hierarchical and communitarian elements of the church.

In his remarks the Pope recognized the fact that “there is still a tendency to unilaterally identify the Church with the hierarchy, forgetting the common responsibility, the common mission” of all baptized members of the Church. Instead, he insisted, laypeople should grow in “the awareness that they are ‘Church,’ because Christ, the eternal Word of the Father” has also called them, making them “his People.” For this reason, he said that “there should be a renewed awareness of our being Church and of the pastoral co-responsibility that, in the name of Christ, all of us are called to carry out.” He insisted that life and ministry in the Church demands the kind of “co-responsibility” that advances “respect for vocations and for the functions of consecrated persons and laypeople,” along with the church’s leaders.

Building on the theme of the need to develop a “mature” church which he began in his Conclave sermon and has continued throughout his pontificate, Pope Benedict XVI said that such maturity demands a “change of mentality.” This conversion of thought is needed, he said, especially regarding how the laity view their identity and role in the church. They must move from considering “themselves [as] collaborators of the clergy to recognizing themselves truly as ‘co-responsible’ for the being and action of the Church, favoring the consolidation of a mature and committed laity.”

I believe that, until this core insight of the Second Vatican Council noted by the Pope is reclaimed, along with processes and structures to ensure it, most members of the laity will remain immature in their faith. And, if they do mature in their awareness of their proper role in the church grounded in their baptism, and don’t have parallel support from the clergy, they will easily join those in the Church of Rome who have “strayed” from Catholicism. Until the gifts (time, talent and treasure) of such people, especially the young, are honored they will become increasingly alienated. This fact seemed to be recognized in the Pope’s remarks, especially when he addressed parish priests’ need to overcome any fears and collaborate with the laity.

The responsibility of the church “shepherds” for their flock begins with the former being absolutely committed to accept what the Pope says about the need to change the present way of thinking about “church.” This begins with a realization that the church is, first of all, an organic

communion of the baptized before it is an organized structure with a clearly-defined hierarchy. While the two are inseparable, the church's hierarchical principle flows from its ultimate Trinitarian communion, not the other way around. When the stress is on the notion of "church" as an organization rather than an organism, it becomes a "what" rather than a "who." If the Pope's words are to be taken seriously, this not only changes the meaning of "church;" it demands that "what" the "who" of the laity believe and are trying to say to the hierarchy cannot be discounted.

I found it interesting that, in this talk at least, the Pope did not elaborate that much on the notion of leadership in the church, which he addressed toward the opening of his remarks. Indeed, when he talked about the church from the perspective of its horizontal and vertical dimensions, it was not looking at the laity as the horizontal component and the hierarchy as the vertical dimension. Rather he rejected the "horizontal perspective" that sees the church only sociologically as an organization rather than one vertically identified in the Trinitarian God.

The Pope pointed to the organic nature of the church in an even deeper way when he stated that "the Church, which has its origin in the Trinitarian God, is a mystery of communion." He said that this mystery is realized not only spiritually but in flesh and blood people, i.e. all the baptized. In this the Pope recalled a key sentence in the opening lines of *Lumen Gentium*, the document on the nature of the Church from the Second Vatican Council. Specifically it stated: "By her relationships with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all [hu]mankind."

Interestingly, in referring to the church as "the communion of the 'Body of Christ' wherein "we all become one people" in which unity "there are no longer distinctions or differences," the Pope named all but one of the key distinctions and differences that existed in the early church—"Greek and Jew, the circumcised and uncircumcised, the barbarian, the Scythian, the slave, the Jew"—except women and men. Why women were excluded from the list, especially since the Pope's referred to Paul, when Galatians includes the unity of women and men in Christ, is a strange and unfortunate omission. However, the theory he invoked of the unity of the Church without "distinctions or differences" needs always to be remembered.

In this sense, the Pope's words about wrong notions regarding the nature of the church as communion of all need special highlighting: "we must also remember that the integration of this doctrine in procedures and its consequent assimilation in the fabric of ecclesial awareness did not happen always and everywhere without difficulty and in accordance with a correct interpretation."

Hopefully, as some fear that some in the "official" church are moving away from the theology of *Lumen Gentium* and the church's communal/Trinitarian nature, Pope Benedict XVI's May 26 words will be studied—and embraced—at all levels. The desired "change in mentality" about the nature of the church is not only needed for maturity among the laity but everyone in the church, including the hierarchy. Indeed, the obligation to help change mindsets that are locked into other ecclesial mindsets is the special obligation of the latter, especially those who see that their special role identifies themselves as the "official" teachers of the faith.