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Moral Discourse within the Church

An Essential Dimension of Social Communication

Catholics in the United States and Canada are experiencing a crisis in moral leadership. Some observers have gone so far as to generalize that lack of leadership adequate to the challenge facing the post-conciliar church is the greatest source of divisiveness and „at the heart of the crisis in contemporary Catholicism.“¹ Recently, this impression has been strengthened by the simultaneous revelation of clerical sexual abuse and its cover-up by many bishops.² While the church in North America struggled to make sense out of this betrayal of trust and apparent disregard for basic morality, Pope John Paul II., in the *motu proprio Misericordia Dei*, set out a plan to deal with the „crisis of the sense of sin“ and the „crisis of reconciliation“ in the church.

The Papal strategy, aimed at preventing the so-called „third Rite of Reconciliation“ from being used as a form of general absolution and a substitute for individual confession to a priest, did little to help the faithful through the real crisis of sin and reconciliation they were living through in their daily lives. Indeed, by identifying its assertions with divine decree and declaring its directives „in no way subject to the discretion of pastors“ and impugning dissent as heterodoxy and disloyalty to God, the pope, and the church,³ the document stifled open discussion of its contents. For more than a year the media gave almost daily reports on the abuse, its cover-ups, the huge and often-secret settlements reached, and the rumours of bankruptcy leaked by various dioceses. The people of God were left outside the communications-loop. The secular media had a „gossip-frenzy.“ The social communication of the church - internally and with the broader society - proved to be a skilled that eluded it.

¹ Bernard Hoose, „Notes on Moral theology-Authority in the Church,“ *Theological Studies* 63 (2002) 107-122, 108. Hoose's „Notes“ present a review of recent literature on authority. The quote above refers to an article by Nicholas Lash in *Authority in the Roman Catholic Church*, ed. B. Hoose (London: Ashgate), forthcoming.

² David O'Brien, „How to Solve the Church Crisis: Ordinary Catholics must act,“ *Commonweal* (February 14, 2003) 10-15; *Misericordia Dei*, April 3, 2002 in *Origins* (May 16, 2002) 13-16.

³ I am being careful to not caricature the papal teaching, taking as a hermeneutical guide for interpreting the *motu proprio*, the comments of Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, who in presenting the new discipline, explained: „It is not within the power of the church to substitute personal confession with general absolution.“ *The Catholic Register*, Toronto (May 19, 2002) 11.

The media of social communication do not exist in the abstract. Their effective use depends on a substratum of functional and effective communication within the church. To a great extent that dialogical or communicative infrastructure is missing in the church. In fact, ordinary Catholics reacted with frustration and a heightened sense of powerlessness in the face of the behaviour of their priests and bishops. There was little they could do to find a unifying voice or to communicate with the hierarchy. Nor could they make their hierarchy communicate with them.⁴ The pope's magisterial statement, on the other hand, was so autocratic and removed from the experience of Catholics - who for the most part have moved far away from the juridical-confessional model of reconciliation - that it was ignored by the faithful.

When, on the one hand, the anguish of ordinary Catholics at the attitudes of their leaders seem to be disregarded in favour of institutional solidarity and, on the other hand, the highest papal utterances on morality in the church are met with indifference, something essential to Catholic life is being lost. I am alarmed by William D'Antonio's findings that an increasing number of Catholics treat the moral authority of the church as irrelevant and simply proceed to make their own decisions about what is right and wrong. At the same time, I am intrigued by his suggestion of „a growing consensus toward an alternate worldview at the grassroots level [of the church]“ and wish to explore the means of communication within the church that will contribute to learning „the truth about morals ... through experience, and through shared decision-making.“⁵

In this article I propose to examine the question of social communication within the church in reference to developing an effective moral discourse. The first part, using the insights of the social sciences, will show that sharing moral consciousness and knowing socially (i.e. as a community) how to respond to evil and work toward good, is essential to the healthy function of religion. This is followed by a discussion of power in the church and its impact on effective communication. In the concluding section I suggest that a foundation for an effective official structure of social, moral communication could be found in the fostering of „communities of practice,“ as they are presently understood in corporate thinking.

⁴ O'Brien, 12-13.

⁵ William D'Antonio, „Autonomy and Democracy in an Autocratic organization: The Case of The Roman Catholic Church,“ *Sociology of Religion* 55 (1994) 379-396.

1. Insights from the social sciences

When the pope speaks of the loss of the sense of sin and of the rituals of reconciliation as a serious crisis in the church, his statement reflects basic anthropological insights into how essential to the identity and function of religion is the connection between worldview and ethos.⁶

A religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of the general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.⁷ In Clifford Geertz's view, religion is a community of people, who rely on a set of symbols to respond to the irrationality of injustice and suffering that is part of every life. Rituals performed at critical times activate the interpretive force of the symbols. When religion doesn't support the confidence of individuals and the community „to make sound moral judgments,“ it risks pushing the community toward moral chaos. It is essential to the integrity of a religion that its interpretive worldview and the „tone, character, and quality of“ its adherents' lives be closely integrated. Religion and the privatization of morality are not compatible.

Moral norms derive their authority from the worldview and are reinforced and reinterpreted through ritual that maintains religion's powerful, pervasive moods and motivations. When events or situations occur that place the worldview in doubt, „the religious response ... is in each case the same: the formulation, by means of symbols, of an image of such a genuine order of the world which will account for, even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes in human experience.“⁸

Victor Turner's studies of African religion clearly bring out the inescapable conclusion that a shared ethos is constitutive of the religious identity of a community. Moreover, evil is more readily grasped as a religious paradox, in relation to the good of the community than as an ideal perfectibility of the individual.⁹ Whatever threatens the commonweal of the community - whether the threat originates in nature, through the interference of the departed spirits, or in human malevolence - can be the cause

⁶ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1969); Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New York: Yale University Press) 1985.

⁷ Geertz, 90.

⁸ Ibid., 108.

⁹ Turner, 44-93.

of moral dilemma. Moral anomaly is something that happens to and is the charge of the entire community. Through rituals the group regains its sense of identity, restores the values, and affirms the truths that protect right relations among its members and with the larger world. Through rituals the individual, whose presence or behaviour is the source of worry for the community, experiences reconnection with the community and to freedom to reaffirm without recrimination the values and the good of the group. The individual sees and affirms the need to be part of this community. Morality is a community issue, never a private matter. It is handed over to individual interpretation only at the risk of endangering the social fabric of shared life and belief.

In terms of the present problem, in a culture that values moral responsibility and freedom of conscience and that eschews closed worldviews in favour of historical and scientific openness, one cannot simply revert to an earlier, simpler age. However, reflection on the structure and function of religion does suggest that contemporary Catholicism is in big trouble. The loss of the sacrament of penance leaves the church without the kinds of rituals necessary to learn how to respond to the presence of evil in the world and its midst. It also leaves the individual without public rites for affirming his or her belonging. A growing indifference to the moral magisterium cuts Catholics off from their traditional source of moral authority and offers no replacement. Finally, the discussion of sin and reconciliation in the language of authority and jurisdiction replaces religious symbols with institutional ones. Without deep roots in the worldview or powerful rituals to reactivate its symbols, Catholicism is left to deal with social evil in a quasi-judicial manner (as in the case of the sex abuse scandal) or with personal sin with recourse to conscience. Unfortunately, the papacy's authoritarian approach to church morality does not begin to address the problem it raises. Instead, it puts at risk values that are central to the church's identity and vitality – removing them from the religious context/worldview through which they can be socially understood and formative of community. The crisis of authority in Roman Catholicism is indeed much more than that: it is a crisis of moral knowledge and response, a crisis of religion.

2. Structures of power and the loss of moral authority

The present crisis, latent since the days of modernism, erupted with full force when the Second Vatican Council initiated a change in the way of conceiving the church. Indeed, the Councils' programme of reform will remain permanently allusive to a church that does not accept its re-

visionary concept of church. This means letting go of a view of ecclesiastical power and authority that is rooted in an adversarial reaction to the secularization of traditionally Catholic governments – the creation of a fortress mentality that could not long outlive the immediate circumstances that gave its rise. „Fortress church“ supposes an interpretive horizon on which the church is considered to be unlike any other human society, requiring an ahistorical, ontological approach to be correctly grasped (such as the permanent validity promised by natural law categories).

Vatican II has turned the page on this conception of authority, proclaiming that the church „has become the world church“ and committing it „to live in a secular and pluralistic society, where [the church] carries out its mission and makes itself present in cultures“ that no longer identify Christianity and civilization.¹⁰ The secular world is seen as the church's „world, our destiny, that we embrace ... the only world we know.“¹¹ *Aggiornamento* is about accepting the humanness of the world in which the church lives and grows and the secular reality of the church. *Aggiornamento* demands changes – unanticipated and unplanned for – in how the church thinks about power and authority, how it makes its decisions, in a word: how it governs itself.

Rahner points out that the Council's way of talking about the church can be achieved if and when Catholics embark on a passage driven by a „free and personal commitment won in the struggle to come to terms with one's faith in a pluralistic milieu.“¹² „The“ church becomes plural, many churches: a community of communities, local, specific, and contingent. Their status as „churches“ depends less on the ecclesiastical institution and its authority and more on their ability to again and again *constitute themselves* through faith and practice, historically discerned and realized as grace. These churches have no choice but to accept as their own the authority and responsibility necessary to be „the fundamental sacrament of the world's salvation ... the experiential promise of the victory of Jesus, the ultimate meaning and the absolute future of the world.“¹³

This notion of the church as eschatological salvation is a pivot-concept

¹⁰ Karl Rahner, „Strukturwandel der Kirche in der künftigen Gesellschaft,“ *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. XIV (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1998) 333–354, 337. Translation mine.

¹¹ Karl Rahner, „Der Christ in seiner Umwelt,“ *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. VII (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1966) 91–102, 91. Translation mine.

¹² *Ibid.*, 95. Translation mine.

¹³ Karl Rahner, „Die Zukunft der Kirche und die Kirche der Zukunft,“ *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. XIV, 319–332, 320. Translation mine.

that brings together the challenge of decentralizing authority in the institutional church (and the urgency with which the laity must take responsibility for this to occur) and the critical issue of moral knowledge. In order to be a sacrament through which the world regains a sense of sin and hope, there is need for local, accessible communities to interpret and engage in the church's solidarity with the „joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the [people] of our time.“¹⁴ The loss of the sense of sin and of appreciation of the sacrament of reconciliation is, in my judgment, a symptom of the unforeseen difficulty of moving away from a natural law view of the church and its authority to a historical consciousness. *It is not simply the doctrinal understanding of sin that eludes the grasp of many Catholics; it is the interpretive horizon itself that leaves them baffled.*

3. Moral knowledge and an alternative vision of authority and power

a. The communicative function of authority. What has been said thus far is neither new nor revolutionary. The red flags raised by anthropology and sociology (signalling the deleterious effects of the loss of moral cohesiveness on religion) and the current public perception of the Roman Catholic Church as institutional-centric make the need for effective action more urgent. The pluralism and diversity of the church, however, means that grandiose schemes of a communal conscience and common purpose for society (à la Durkheim) or the dream of a restoration of the Christian culture of Europe or North America (à la John Paul II) must give way to a less organic and more consensual notion of both civil society and of the church. Both citizens and the Catholic faithful insist on less authority and governance in favour of more autonomy in the form of economic freedom, political freedom, and most recently moral freedom and freedom of conscience. The achievement of moral freedom as a right in civil society may be taken as a paradigm that underscores the need for and the promise of moral dialogue in the church. Leadership in this context must be able to do more than foster dialogue among those led, it must be communicative, recognizing that the separation between the led and the leaders is no longer a clear line.

Rahner's description of the church as a community of communities (where the members are mutually responsible for ensuring that the

¹⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1975) 903.

church continually becomes what it is called to be) makes the free commitment of faith and the decision to associate central to their existence. „*Communio*“ theology is unthinkable without effective social communication. It is unworkable, if it feeds into an ideology of a „single“, worldwide Catholic community. Rahner's down-to-earth observation that the church is not to be construed as an international institution with local „branch offices“ and „outlets“ for church services is of revolutionary import for Roman Catholicism's way of thinking about authority and office and about responsibility for mission and ministry to its members. Such communities, however, are in communion with the historical tradition of the institutional church and they are unquestionably accountable to other Christian communities through communication with local bishops and ultimately with the Petrine Office. *Yet, within the church we are at a loss as to the means of such communication or of its authoritative import.*

There is no doubt in my mind that the transformation from the „cultural church“ to a „community of believers“ is to all appearances impossible for the worldwide population of Roman Catholics, especially since a great number of Catholics live only on the fringe of the church or treat their faith as a kind of accident of birth.¹⁵ What could, however, prove helpful at this point both in the discussion and in history is *the effort to rethink the question of authority and moral knowledge in the church in terms of communicative leadership*. Staying with the examples of moral knowledge and authority, what can the church learn from the insights of religious anthropology, on the one hand, and from the discussion in business and organization studies of the challenges of modern „knowledge organizations?“ What can be done in terms of re-forming the institutional church as it is (not as we would like it to be) is limited, requiring models that offer hope for the necessary balance and tension between central authority and local autonomy. At the same time, the models chosen must be capable of helping resolve the problem of moral communication and shared values/commitments in the church as a worldwide community of communities. In a word, we are looking for models that will facilitate the reception of the Vatican II's vision of church in the consciousness and lives of its members.

Because the issue of moral authority and moral freedom is not unique to the Roman church, it cannot be addressed exclusively on the basis of church discipline or of ecclesiastical authority. Indeed, responding to the problem from such a perspective ignores the social and cultural context that it is trying to influence. For example, Michael Walzer sees in the

¹⁵ William E. McManus, „The Right of Catholics to Govern the Church,“ *America* 167 (November 4, 1992) 374-378, 376.

„growing disorganization of American society“ a clear indicator of how far we are from being a society „of lively, engaged, and effective men and women – where the honour of ‚action‘ belongs to the many and not to the few.“¹⁶ Yet he criticizes as romantic and overly simplistic approaches to this situation that see the United States as a single community of patriots, citizens, or „Americans“ committed to a basic set of public values.

The communitarian life is not the real life of many people in the modern world. This is so in two senses. First, though the power of the democratic state has grown enormously, the rule of the demos is in significant ways illusory. Second, despite the single-mindedness of the republican ideology, politics rarely engages the full attention of the citizens who are supposed to be its chief protagonists.¹⁷

In other words, without an infrastructure of effective social communication, the question of public morals and values cannot only not be resolved, it cannot be addressed.

Alan Wolfe points out the connection between this observed disunity, the lack of common cause, and the emergence of moral freedom as a civil liberty.¹⁸ For Wolfe, a fierce attachment to the principle that „individuals should determine for themselves what it means to lead a good and virtuous life“ describes „the defining virtue of the moral philosophy of the Americans.“¹⁹ People look at themselves – what will meet their needs – as the basis for choosing the „right course of action.“ Although Wolfe’s respondents may assume a common moral substratum within which this freedom will be exercised (rules, principles, republican virtues, the Constitution, the categorical imperative), they consider a wide variety of moral foundations „from orthodoxy to nonbelief and then decide on which suits them best.“²⁰ In practice, there is no constructive and communally binding set of common moral ideals or moral practice, leading Wolfe to (what I consider) the negative conclusion that in the modern world, because of the „voluminous and impersonal“ nature of social interaction, „society becomes possible only to the degree to which the ‚no‘ that the conscience speaks to the individual becomes generalized to society as a

¹⁶ Michael Walzer, „The Idea of Civil Society: A Path to Social Reconstruction“, *Dissent* 38 (1991) 293-304, 304. See also: Robert Bellah, et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row: 1985) and Reginald W. Bibby *Unknown Gods: The Ongoing Story of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1993).

¹⁷ Ibid., 294.

¹⁸ Alan Wolfe, *Moral Freedom: The Search for Virtue in a World of Choice* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), especially chapters VI and VII, 167-231.

¹⁹ Ibid., 195.

²⁰ Ibid., 203.

whole.²¹ The inherent problematic of civil order and moral freedom can be summarized in the words of Charles Reich: „the individual is freed to build his own philosophy and values, his own life style, and his own culture“ without regard for tradition or context.²²

The debate between civil loyalty and individual freedom, however, leaves a legacy that „confuses two different phenomena. One is the freedom to choose how to live. The other is the freedom to consider oneself unbound by rules.“²³ Despite numerous attempts to point out this confusion, the high esteem in which moral freedom is regarded and „a deeply held populist suspicion of authority“ make the American public extremely resistant to calls to return to the „religious and civil traditions that shaped America’s founding and provide the inspiration for great leaders like Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr.“²⁴ *The way out of the situation is not found in this direction, but in one of moral dialogue that allows its participants “to play a role in creating the morality by which they will be guided.”*²⁵

For Wolfe moral dialogue will not lead to a strong moral cohesiveness, resolve, or outcomes in society. Rather than lament its limits, Wolfe holds that developing moral communication is the only way forward and therefore must be thought of „as a challenge to be met rather than as a condition to be cured.“²⁶ Peter Drucker explains the need for moral discourse primarily as a „knowledge“ issue. „Traditional communities no longer have much integrating power; they cannot survive the mobility which knowledge confers on the individual.“²⁷ The inability of persons to transfer their own personal sense of morality to the business world and corporate society has also been well documented, leaving companies vulnerable to disloyalty and bad ethics.²⁸

There is little reason to believe that the situation within Roman Catholicism in North America is different. The findings of Robert Bellah and Alan Wolfe suggest that Catholics express this freedom and create their own versions of moral fidelity, which they consider compatible with their religion. D’Antonio’s research shows how distrust of religious authorities contributes to the individual’s unwillingness to accept the moral lea-

²¹ Ibid., 205.

²² Charles Reich, *The Greening of America* (New York: Crown, 1995), 241.

²³ Wolfe, 224.

²⁴ Ibid., 221.

²⁵ Ibid., 226.

²⁶ Ibid., 230.

²⁷ Peter F. Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society* (New York: Harper Business, 1993), 94.

²⁸ See Frédérick B. Bird, *The muted conscience: moral silence and the practice of ethics in business* (Westport, Conn.: Quorum Books, 1996).

dership of the hierarchy. As in the broader culture, the situation of moral knowledge and cohesiveness in the church is precarious in terms of the balance between autonomy and authority necessary for a strong society. The importance of a community being able to identify collective goals and interpret certain kinds of behaviours as virtuous is ill-served when moral order and authority is relegated to „the aggregation of individual preferences.“²⁹

The church, as well as its host culture, needs an imaginative means of activating the symbols and narratives that are integral to the ability to speak intelligently about human morality and common purpose.³⁰ The kinds of initiatives that can serve this purpose are already at work in industry and politics, where it has become evident that not only do real gains come from having people work on those parts of a problem that interest them, but that this may be the most effective way of dealing with the growing disparity between personal goals and corporate good, private values and communal morality - gaining and gathering the knowledge necessary to cope with problems that escape the capacity of the most sophisticated technologies of intelligence and information control. A brief look at these initiatives provides theology with some tested models of the kinds of communities that are essential to addressing the religious and authority problems raised by the impasse of autocratic rule and moral freedom that presently threatens the church.

b. Gaining and using moral knowledge. Whatever will help the church regain its sense of morality and discipleship must build on the following premises: moral knowledge is historical knowledge; historical knowledge cannot be controlled by doctrine; moral knowledge is not primarily the knowledge of sin and its variations; moral knowledge is self-knowledge. The new notion of the church makes it very clear that the crisis of moral authority cannot be reached by reconciling an endless stream of „subject-centered“ ethical opinions with each other and the moral tradition of Catholicism. Instead, a new paradigm is called for that envisions morality as a call to discipleship leading the church - in its plurality of communities - into an undisclosed future requiring the kind of imagination and creative rationality that is born of dialogue.³¹

²⁹ Amitai Etzioni, „The Responsive Community: A Communitarian Perspective,“ *American Sociological Review* 61 (1996) 1-11, 4.

³⁰ See Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

³¹ Juergen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, tr. Fredrick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, Ma.: The MIT Press, 1990), 294-326; see also: Gerard Magill, „Imaginative moral discernment: Newman and the tension between Reason and Religion,“ *Heythrop Journal* 32 (1991) 493-510 and „Moral Imagination in Theo-

In bringing the discussion back to the original question of the „crisis of the sense of sin that is apparent in today's culture“ and the absence of moral authority in church and society, we must acknowledge that moral knowledge (the knowledge of sin and reconciliation) has been, since the time of Eden, historical knowledge. It begins with a vision, a call, and a promise; is concretized in a covenant or the initiation of a journey or quest; and is discovered in the confusion, hardship, and tragedy of human experience that reveals something unknown or unacknowledged in the human endeavour.

As historical knowledge, moral knowledge cannot be imposed, learned, applied or controlled centrally either in the data banks of natural law, the catholic catechism, or in the authentic teachings of the Vatican apparatus. Peter Drucker notes that in order for corporations to benefit from local, historical knowledge, they must respect the ability and right of local groups to identify their own task, to act autonomously, be creative, and to teach what they learn. The quality of their outcome not its quantity is the measure of productivity. The corporation must view these „knowledge based communities“ not as a necessary evil, but as an asset.³²

Moral knowledge is not primarily the ability to determine „sin“ and its „remedies“ in the behaviours of oneself or others (the confessional mode), but the ability to see the world in the light of one's faith and construct a way of living in harmony with that view. I am not recommending downloading the „power of the keys“ or decentralizing the disciplinary-dogmatic function of Rome on matters of ethics and morality. The task of the communities of faith envisioned by Rahner is one of fidelity to the eschatological „yes“ of God to humanity and humanity to God in Jesus Christ. The Christ-event speaks of and reveals not „an objective truth, but ... an ongoing revelation.“ Faith communities establish a relationship with their Catholic tradition, much like that which Christ established with the Old Testament: one of creatively coming to understand it and recognise the moral demands it makes, as it is reinterpreted in the context of their lives today.³³

Moral knowledge is self-knowledge. It is not „pure knowledge detached from any particular kind of being. The object of moral knowing is human beings, their relationships and responsibilities. Its purpose is to govern action, not determine what is, to see, what is not always the same

logical Method and Church Tradition: John Henry Newman,“ *Theological Studies* 53 (1992) 451-475.

³² Drucker, 83-84.

³³ See Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, tr. L. D'Isanto and D. Webb (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1999) 49-50.

but can also be different.³⁴ Not only does one construct a way of living with one's worldview, but also that way of living tests and corrects the worldview. Johann Baptist Metz calls this knowledge „apocalyptic“: it reveals the world as the history of salvation (and of sin) and the church's and Christian's role in that history. It thus uncovers who we are as Christians and creates the possibility of the next step of fidelity and discipleship.³⁵

In such a view, handing over to local communities the task of re-learning and teaching the meaning of sin and settling on what reconciliation must involve shifts the focus of the discussion from judging the inadequacies and malevolence of individuals to recognizing the „sin of the world“ and the community's relationship to the concrete experiences of that sinfulness, experienced as attitudes, behaviours, dispositions, and actions at variance with their beliefs in Christ and the Kingdom he proclaimed. In this context the community comes to recognize and understand the values and virtues necessary for it to be a sign of salvation in the world, as well as come to know and understand its own – individually and collective – sin in terms of failure or refusal to accept the conversion integral to the „repent and believe in the good news“ that is constitutive of church. Out of such an experience the church comes to know what repentance and reconciliation entail and will find the means, including the ritual, that activate the symbols of faith along with their transformative power.

4. Communities of Practice

The theoretical justification for a transformation of the church's authority structure into one of communicative leadership exists. However, its practical realization within a paradigm of a „community of communities“ has proven notoriously problematic and frustrating. Charles Curran, in reference to the church's ethical calling, envisions a „community of moral discourse.“³⁶ Francis S. Fiorenza argues that becoming a community of interpretation that publicly discusses issues of justice and conceptions of goodness is a foundational task of the church.³⁷ *Both writers, however, fail to distinguish between the church as a whole and local communities. In addressing the practical working out of these ideals, one must resist the*

³⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., rev. and tr. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2000) 314.

³⁵ Johann Baptist Metz, *Zur Theologie der Welt* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1968).

temptation to think in terms of the universal church. Nor do I propose that „communities of practice“ become the new form of parish life, as was done by the proponents of „basis communities.“ Instead theologians, pastors, and laity must set out to discover and put into practice a variety of initiatives that allow local autonomy and central authority to coexist; that create the possibility of dialogue between the less formal cutting edge of the church and the administrative centre, which acts as custodian of the deposit of the faith.³⁸

The crisis of the sense of sin and of the public, as well as ritual response to it raises the question of the church's capacity to address the practical demands of moral knowledge. A strong theological argument has been in place for some time that supports the power of the laity, along with local pastors and bishops, to seize opportunities based in their experience to respond to the grace of being church, without following a chain of command. A pluralistic church within a pluralistic world requires new structures to replace the command and obey format that has lost its grip on the people.

For over two decades Etienne Wenger has studied the concept and functioning of „communities of practice“ in the workplace. These communities are „groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.“³⁹ They meet, spend time together, share information, insight and advice. In the process they „accumulate knowledge, they become informally bound by the value that they find in learning together. Over time they develop a unique perspecti-

³⁶ Charles E. Curran, *The Church and Morality: An Ecumenical and Catholic Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

³⁷ Francis S. Fiorenza, „The Church as a Community of Interpretation: Political Theology between Discourse Ethics and Hermeneutical Reconstruction,“ in *Habermas, modernity, and public theology*, ed. D.S. Browning and F. S. Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 66-91.

³⁸ Turner's observations about structure and *communitas* are worth noting in this regard. Structure refers to the jural and hierarchical ordering of status, roles, and offices. *Communitas* describes the particularity, immediacy, and spontaneity of relationships between equals. The church requires both structural and communitarian modalities of social relationship. While neither can replace the other modality, Turner warns: „Behavior in accordance with one model tends to ‚drift away‘ from behavior in terms of the other.“ The most effective relationship between the two modalities is one of tensive balance requiring effective and mutual communication and interaction. See Turner, 131, 177-178.

³⁹ Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, William Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) 4.

ve on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches."⁴⁰

Communities of this kind exist throughout society for a wide range of reasons. They also exist within the church. They are not primarily about the distribution of power or restructuring roles and functions within the ecclesiastical organization, yet (if we can go on the experience of business), they „fundamentally [transform] the landscape of an organization.“⁴¹ Communities of practice are more than „discussion clubs“ and, to be effective in relation both to themselves and the larger organization of which they are part, one must acknowledge their structural fundamentals: domain, community, and practice.

„Domain“ refers to the reason why people are meeting, their area of concern. In our case, the question of following the Gospel, of being church in the world today is the commitment that „inspires members to contribute and participate, guides their learning, and gives meaning to their actions.“⁴² „Community“ creates the social fabric of change, the „social capital“ fostered by the interaction, the continuity, the reciprocity among members, and values experienced that are conditions for conscious growth and moral conversion. It indicates that the community sees itself as the product of the faith commitment of its members and not the result of an external mandate, and leadership emerges from within the community. „Practice“ refers to the specific knowledge that is developed, shared and maintained by the community. It includes self-knowledge – an understanding of the community as responsible for Christ’s presence in the world through the church – and „a set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, languages, stories, and documents that community members share“ and that are integral to retaining their identity and purpose.⁴³ In relation to the historical mission of the church as incarnate in human history, communities of practice will inevitably deal with the issues in human society that challenge their Christian identity (the sin of the world) and force them to rethink their central symbols, such as the kingdom of God (to which they turn in repentance and conversion). They will generate socially defined ways of doing things, a set of common approaches and shared values that constitute who they are as church.⁴⁴

I want to emphasize how much communities of practice are apt means

⁴⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁴¹ Ibid., 20.

⁴² Ibid., 28.

⁴³ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁴ These communities do not try to construct some version of the kingdom for themselves (in a sectarian sense) nor do they try to impose the ideals of the kingdom on society (in the sense of zealots). They are rather concerned with questions of their

of addressing „the crisis of the sense of sin in today's culture.“ The public image of Catholic morality is one of legalism and authoritarianism, in which the men of Rome and their curial apparatus are perceived as the lawgivers and Catholic morality as the law. As a result, contact between Catholics and their religious symbols are obscured to the point that „the institutional Church, rather than the Risen Christ [becomes] the over-arching symbol“ of morality.⁴⁵ The communities-of-practice-approach respects the connection between the problem of moral knowledge and the question of discipleship.

In conclusion, when authoritarian teaching is greeted by indifference to authority, fundamental issues in religion in general and Catholicism in particular are muted. Structural change in the church is not theoretical or juridical; it has historical content. The questioning and unrest of the laity is a *signum temporum*, the seed of renewal, and a critical call for the reconciliation of the core beliefs of their faith with the daily experience that contradicts them. The question of sin and discipleship as it is raised in small communities is qualitatively different from the one suggested by curial concerns of liceity, validity, jurisdiction, and other technicalities.⁴⁶ Catholics in general want to move away from a one-sided view of authority and to discover a new vision of the church as the human beings responding to salvation as proclaimed and brought about by Christ. As Rahner observes, they „can no longer give over responsibility [for the church] to its office holders and hierarchical institutions.“⁴⁷

Communities of practice can make a significant contribution to the problem of authority and its discontents. Although they have no warrant to pretend to be „the“ new structure of the church, they can be a significant part of the church, with a unique and necessary mission. These communities are bound to a larger church through parishes and dioceses, pastors and particularly bishops, whose magisterium has „the essential task of authenticating, guarding, and proclaiming the faith.“⁴⁸ The teaching power of the whole church, which is a consensual consciousness created out of dialogue and communicative action, cannot be experienced or exercised in a universal, totalitarian fashion, but can become an enab-

own understanding of their Christian and ecclesial vocation and the moral knowledge and responsibility that comes with it.

⁴⁵ Mark Muldoon and John Veltri, „From Symbolic Rapport to Public Rhetoric in the Roman Catholic Church,“ *Grail*, n. 4 11 (1995) 25-43, 36.

⁴⁶ In this regard Wegner's observation is enlightening. „Conventional structures do not address knowledge-related problems as effectively as they do problems of performance and accountability.“

⁴⁷ Rahner, „Zukunft der Kirche,“ 327. Translation mine.

⁴⁸ Hoose, 110.

ling gift through which the Petrine office serves the unity of the universal church.

Social systems cannot be adequately understood or changed by focusing only on their component parts or organizational charts. Since „change in one part of the system will stimulate change in another,“ it is imperative that Catholics not get preoccupied with the apparent impasse caused by the autocratic structure of official power. While the task of total restructuring may be beyond any individual Catholic's power and it may be beyond one's immediate understanding to calculate the impact of what one does on the system as a whole, what happens as the result of thoughtful, responsible action in one part of the system moves the whole system forward.⁴⁹

I do not foresee communities of practice as the future shape of the church or propose them as substitutes for the traditional parish. They can be a dynamic element in the church, an alternative to the crisis of authority and the crisis of the sense of sin experienced in the church today. I do not share Ducker's optimism, which (in reference to the global reality of multinational corporations) sees community based knowledge initiatives as „the most valuable asset of the twenty-first century,“ which will bring about „fundamental changes in the very structure and nature of the economic system.“⁵⁰ Mine is a more guarded confidence that communities of practice can serve a positive function in balancing the need for moral authority and the force of moral autonomy in the church. They can serve as what Etzioni describes as „notches on the slope, formatting social arrangements that can prevent social avalanches,“⁵¹ caused by the downward movement of an autocratic centre and the lack of resistance from a muted laity.

⁴⁹ Marshall Fine, „The Family as System,“ in *Today's Family: A critical focus*, ed. P. Meikeljohn, A Yeager, and L. Kuch (Don Mills, Ontario: Collier Macmillan Canada, Inc., 1990) 28-35.

⁵⁰ Drucker, 79, 94.

⁵¹ Etzioni, 8.