

**ASIAN  
HORIZONS**

Vol. 9, No. 3, September 2015

Pages: 467-483

## **A CRITICAL READING OF *LUMEN GENTIUM***

**Delfo Cortina Canceran, OP<sup>♦</sup>**

*De La Salle University & University of Santo Tomas, Manila*

### **Abstract**

This paper delves on the *Lumen Gentium* (LG) of the Vatican II documents of the church. It focuses on the tensions found in the text which basically contain a duality of perspectives. These perspectives revolve around ecclesiological models of the church. In particular, the mystical body of Christ and the people of God models, the people of God and the hierarchical institution perspectives are prominent. Moreover, the paper will defend the democratization models that address the main problem of the church, which is power. These democratization models side with the victims of this unilateral and asymmetrical power — the poor and women — for their liberation.

**Keywords:** Church, Communion Model, Democratization Model, Ecclesiology, Hierarchy, Kingdom of God, People of God, Mystical Body of Christ

### **1. Introduction**

More than five decades have passed after the Vatican II Council ended. However, the discussions on the documents are far from being finished. These discussions only prove that the church is a common concern of our Christian life. Even at the Vatican II Council itself, the *Lumen Gentium* (LG) was the most debated document in the

---

<sup>♦</sup>**Delfo Cortina Canceran, OP** is a member of the Dominican Province of the Philippines. He completed his PhD in Theology at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium) and took his PhD in Sociology at the University of the Philippines, Diliman Campus. He specializes in contemporary theology, sociology and philosophy. Aside from researching, writing and teaching in various institutions, he is also involved in Justice and Peace advocacy being the Spokesperson of the Pilgrim for Peace Organization, a member of the Ecumenical Research Center and a radio host in the Veritas radio station. Email: delfocanceran@yahoo.com

council, especially the part on the church hierarchy. The controversies and compromises in the council debate were textualized and reflected in the document. Today, they crop up noticeably and are reckoned with seriously. The present critical situations and practices in our society impel this questioning of LG.

In this paper, I will deal with these controversies and debates by pointing out the sources of the tensions in LG. However, I will not include all parts of it, I shall only concentrate on 1) Mystery of the Church, 2) People of God Ecclesiology, and 3) Hierarchy in LG. These aspects, I think, are significant in our discussion. After discussing these aspects, I shall present the alternative proposals in an attempt to settle the tensions. Furthermore, I shall point out the central problem of the tension, namely, the question of power. I shall hold out to the contention that we can only settle the tensions once we confront the central problem and debate on it.

## **2. The Sources of the Tension**

I shall point out two tensions where most of the controversies and debates revolve, namely 1) the tension between the Mystery and People of God; 2) the tension between the People of God and Hierarchy, and under it, we can separate two of them, namely, A) democratic church and institutional church, and B) papacy and collegiality.

### **2.1. Mystery and People of God**

These models (mystery and people) do not exclude one another, neither do they refer to the same thing. However, their difference is precisely the source of their conflict. Hence, the tension is derived from the priority that each advocates. To show the tension, let me quote from LG:

LG, 1: Since the church, in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament — a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men [and women]

LG, 2: ...Christ, the redeemer, 'who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creature' (Col 1:15)...

LG, 3: The church — that is, the kingdom of Christ already present in mystery — grows visibly through the power of God in the world.

In these quotations, we can already see the preeminence of the idea of "mystery" or its Latin equivalent, sacrament. As such, a mystery or a sacrament includes the duality of the invisible and the visible, the divine and the human. Jesus Christ, who is the visible image of the

invisible God, is the prime analogue of this alleged unified duality. He is both divine and human in a hypostatic union. Applied to the church, by definition, the church is both divine and human; invisible and visible reality.

Once we consider the place of the church vis-a-vis the world and the Kingdom of God, the tension becomes more pronounced. The church is "in between" the world and the kingdom. The church is in the world trying to proclaim the "already" (present) Kingdom, and, at the same time, a "sign" pointing at eschatological reality of the "not yet" (future) Kingdom. The church is therefore a pilgrim struggling in the world in order to attain the utopia of the Kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

The mystery of the church in LG is a continuity of the mystical body of Christ model of the pre-conciliar ecclesiology. It does not discard the old ecclesiology, but rather incorporates it. By doing so, it continues the unbroken chains of church tradition. The old model of the mystical body is important in our discussion because in the controversies and debates on LG, this model will re-emerge. Being incorporated does not necessarily mean that the old model smoothly harmonizes with the conciliar ecclesiology. Let me quote from the document: "Christ instituted this new covenant, namely the new covenant in his blood (cf. 1 Cor 11:25), he called a race made up of Jews and Gentiles which would be one, not according to the flesh, and this race would be the new people of God" (LG, 9).

In the document, the two aspects (divine and human, invisible and visible) of mystery are kept intact in the text, and the tension is hidden. But when we scrutinize the debates regarding the conciliar and post-conciliar ecclesiologies, we can discover the tension. The basic tension is derived from the two aspects of mystery, because, as we said mystery or sacrament includes both the invisible and the visible, however, in the people of God ecclesiology, it seems to emphasize the visible aspect and eclipse the invisible. In effect, it undermines the invisible (the divine) or worse, reverses the hierarchy of being (the primacy of the divine over the human).

In the conciliar debate, this tension was discussed. We can see the conflict of two contending ecclesiologies, namely, the mystical body of Christ and the People of God. The mystical body of Christ tends to emphasize the hierarchy, while the People of God focuses on the community. After long debates, the council voted for the People of God ecclesiology. However, this did not settle the debates. There

---

<sup>1</sup>Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power*, London: SMC Press, 1986, 1.

were some compromises made. Nonetheless, the People of God was accepted due to a holistic understanding of the church and relevance to pastoral renewal in the church.<sup>2</sup>

## **2.2. The People of God and the Hierarchy**

As we have mentioned, the People of God ecclesiology gained popularity in the council because it opened new historical, eschatological and communal horizons of the church. Continuing the biblical understanding of the Christian scriptures, the People of God ecclesiology has concretely articulated the pastoral renewal and its relation to the world.<sup>3</sup> People of God ecclesiology means the human community, without immediately referring to the hierarchy. In this sense, the priority is given to the whole people God. It means that before being divided in various offices or ministries, the church has to be construed as a whole reality<sup>4</sup>.

### **2.2.1. Democratic Church and Institutional Church**

Historians converge on their critical analysis that the church had been structured or ordered in the monarchical or pyramidal model. The monarch holds the absolute power. In the church, the monarch is the pope, who is the head of the body and the Vicar of Christ. This monarchical model re-emerges in the document while dealing with the hierarchy of the church, without, of course, mentioning explicitly “monarchy”: Let me quote from the document:

LG, 7: In that body the life of Christ is communicated to those who believe and who, through the sacraments, are united in a hidden and real way to Christ in his passion and glorification.

LG, 8: But the society structured with hierarchical organs and the mystical body of Christ, the visible society and the spiritual community, the earthly church and the church endowed with heavenly riches, are not to be thought of as two realities. On the contrary, they form one complex reality, which comes together from a human and a divine element.

LG, 10: Though they differ essentially and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are none the less ordered one to another; each in its own proper way shares in one priesthood.

LG, 12: The whole body of the faithful who have an anointing that comes from the holy one (cf. 1 Jn 2:20 and 27) cannot err in matters of belief. This

---

<sup>2</sup>Kafoa Solomone, *The People of God in Vatican II, the Biblical Antecedents of the Notion and its Reception in the Post-Conciliar Church* (Doctoral Dissertation at K.U. Leuven, 1989), 165.

<sup>3</sup>Kafoa Solomone, *The People of God in Vatican II*, 165-166.

<sup>4</sup>Kafoa Solomone, *The People of God in Vatican II*, 150 & 166.

characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people, when, “from the bishops to the last of the faithful” they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals. By this appreciation of the faith, aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, the People of God, guided by the sacred teaching authority (magisterium), and obeying it, receives not the mere word of men [and women], but truly the word of God (cf. 1 Th 2:13)...

Considering these quotations, the tension between the people and the hierarchy becomes evident. On the one hand, it says that the body is one or united as “the body of Christ”; but, on the other hand, it says that the body is ordered and structured, “essentially and not only in degree.” By virtue of consecration of the hierarchy, the “ontology” of the consecrated person is changed. It is not only, to use a scholastic term, accidental change, but a substantial one. The tension is then located in the hierarchization of the body. Consecration, not baptism, hierarchizes the Body of Christ. This structure is justified or legitimized by the model of the body itself, since by analogy, the body is ordered or structured by biological necessity or better, genetic necessity. In effect, the church being a body is also by divine necessity, ordered and structured accordingly. In the hierarchy of the body, the head assumes the primacy. The mystical Body of Christ ecclesiology also justifies this hierarchy. According to Michiels, “the pre-conciliar ecclesiology — Body of Christ — especially accents the invisible bond between the risen Lord and his church. This invisible bond becomes visible in the hierarchy.”<sup>5</sup>

We can point out that the tension lies on the two conflicting ecclesiologies, namely the institutional and the democratic. For the institutional model, magisterium is identified with the official authority; while for the democratic model, as used by LG, it gives priority to the people of God. The document discusses the people of God first before it speaks about the authority in the church.<sup>6</sup> By means of baptism, the people of God have received, to use another scholastic term, a “character”. With this indelible mark, the people receive a common priesthood. As people of God, the whole community has received a *sensus fidei*. The phrases “guided by the sacred teaching authority” and “obeying it (the sacred teaching

---

<sup>5</sup>Robrecht Michiels, “The Self-Understanding of the Church after Vatican II,” *Louvain Studies* 14, 2 (1989) 90.

<sup>6</sup>Richard Penaskovic, “The Theological Issues in Theology and Authority,” in *Theology and Authority: The Theological Issues*, ed. Richard Penaskonovic, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987, 120.

authority)" are problematic here. There are two inseparable functions of the church, especially of the Magisterium, namely, the teaching function and the listening function. However, historically, the Magisterium has emphasized only the teaching function and neglected the listening function, if not separated these twofold functions. Applied to the hierarchy, the clergy has the teaching function, while laity just listens to their word and echoes their voice.<sup>7</sup>

### **2.2.2. Papacy and Collegiality**

Admittedly, this part was the most discussed aspect of LG in the Council. It only goes to show that the hierarchy was under attack and at stake. In fact, to settle the controversy, an explanatory note was added. In the Vatican I, the papacy was clearly defined and its infallibility was defended. But with the Vatican II, the powers of the hierarchy are supposed to be shared among the college of Bishops:

Just as, in accordance with the Lord's decree, St. Peter and the rest of the apostles constitute a unique apostolic college, so in like fashion the Roman Pontiff, Peter's successor, and the bishops, the successors of the apostles, are related with and united to one another... The college or body of bishops has for all that no authority unless united with the Roman Pontiff, Peter's successor, as its head, whose primatial authority, let it be added, over all, whether pastors or faithful, remains in its office as vicar of Christ, namely, and as pastor of the entire church, has full, supreme and universal power over the whole church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered (LG, 22).

We can add the Explanatory Note: "The Pope, as supreme pastor of the church, may exercise his power at any time, as he sees fit, by reason of the demands of his office" (LG, 4).

The tension between the papacy and collegiality arises again due to the two conflicting ecclesiologies. On the one hand, we have the Curia leaders asserting the primacy of the Pope, and, on the other hand, we have the theologians (Congar, Rahner and others) who are pushing for collegiality. The collegiality was critical in the council. Evidently, the Curia leaders were then still operating within the monarchical or pyramidal model of the church. In this model, the church was one universal diocese headed by the pope, who was the supreme bishop. Local bishops were representatives of the pope to their assigned territories, deriving all their authorities from the pope. The theologians that we mentioned were moving towards collegiality. Collegiality makes all the bishops, including the pope

---

<sup>7</sup>See Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power*.

forming one college and having a joint responsibility for the universal church, without denying the unique position of the pope within the college. However, the phrase “no authority unless united with the Roman Pontiff” implies that without the head and unless under the pope, there will be no authority given to the college. Nonetheless, the view of collegiality comes substantially closer to connecting papal infallibility rooted in the whole people of God.<sup>8</sup>

However, with the insertion of the Explanatory Notes, under the influence of the Curia leaders, the Theological Commission reaffirms papal primacy. The proponents of collegiality were at first abashed. This complicated, obscurely worded note seemed on the surface to compromise and confuse collegiality. However, after considerable soul-searching discussion, the council leaders decided that the explanatory note did not eviscerate the basic concept of collegiality, and eventually accepted it. Privately, the theologians marvelled at the exquisite resourcefulness of the entrenched Curia leaders, who were able to assert their model.<sup>9</sup>

### **3. Alternative Ecclesiologies**

As we have seen, the basic problem is the tension derived from the split between the People of God and the Hierarchy. Many theologians have tried to grapple with this problem and they have offered some solutions to it. In this part, I will try to present the solutions they have proposed to diffuse the tensions generated by these conflicting ecclesiologies. I will present two solutions, namely, 1) *Communio Model* and 2) *Democratization Model*. However, I cannot remain neutral in this debate. I shall be opting for the democratization model and justify it.

#### **3.1. Communio Model**

According to Michiels, the Conciliar ecclesiology of the People of God has failed to successfully integrate the pre-conciliar ecclesiology of the Body of Christ. He therefore opts and offers the *Communio Model* as a solution to the tension. In his own words, “The church as a community of the faithful, a model which, I am convinced, represents an adequate filling out of an appropriate strategy for the conciliar ‘People of God’ ecclesiology.”<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>Robert McClory, *Power and the Papacy, the People and Politics behind the Doctrine of Infallibility*, Leguori Missouri: Triumph, 1997, 161.

<sup>9</sup>Robert McClory, *Power and the Papacy*, 168.

<sup>10</sup>Robrecht Michiels, “The Self-Understanding of the Church after the Vatican II,” 96.

However, this *Communio* Model does not settle completely the problem. Considering the existing literature, we can see that there are various interpretations of it, and within it, there are still unresolved debates. In this paper, we will only present two contemporary adherents to *Communio* Model, namely, David Schindler and J. -M.R. Tillard.

### **3.1.1. David Schindler: *Communio of Love***

Recognizing the conflicting ecclesiologies between the democratic and the institutional models, where people of God is equated with democracy, while the institution is identified with hierarchical institution, Schindler proposes an alternative to this dualism: *communio of love*.<sup>11</sup> He uses three analogies. First is the incarnation, where Mary freely consented (*fiat*) to be the mother of Jesus. Second is the marriage union, where God intends a graced spousal relation with the world. Third is the incarnation itself, where the hypostatic union of two natures remain complete (unmixed divine and human nature). With these analogies, the church is intimately linked together in a single unified being.

According to this ecclesiology, spousal is a relation of diversity. Each one who enters into it is different. Spousal does not dissolve this difference, rather respects it profoundly. What unites the couples is their promise of love to each other. Applying this ecclesiological understanding, the church is also diverse and different in many aspects, precisely, a church of churches. The church is turned intrinsically toward the world because it is Christ's own incarnational mission.

### **3.1.2. J.-M.R. Tillard: *Eucharistic Communio***

Like Schindler, Tillard believes in the diversity in the church. The diverse perceptions of the church and its mission co-exist.<sup>12</sup> However, what unites them is that people belong to God's community of faith, where the promise of salvation and the proclamation of the Good News are entrusted. The internal unity of the community comes from the fact that each member of the community is unique and singular. They are gathered as a community of faith into the one and indivisible Body of Christ, the Lord.

---

<sup>11</sup>David Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church*, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company Grand Rapids, 1996.

<sup>12</sup>J.-M.R. Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*, Collegeville: A Michael Glazier Book, The Liturgical Press, 1992.

The missionary task of the church reveals its ultimate purpose and its authentic nature only when understood in the theology of the Body of Christ. Even if there is hesitation concerning the Eucharistic foundation of the whole ecclesiology, what must be recognized is the insertion of the ecclesial body into the personal body of the Lord, which gives its mission. In its essence, the church is missionary because of the Lord. The church is therefore every local community gathered together by the Eucharist. It is in this sense that the church of God is church of churches, a communion of local churches, a communion of communion. The Eucharist signifies therefore the authentic catholicity of a communion. It shows the essential quality of it as well as its universality.

To summarize, both Schindler and Tillard converge on proposing for a *communio* model of the church. However, they diverge on their emphasis, namely, *communio* of love and Eucharistic *communio*, respectively. The proposals are, I think, metaphysically well argued for it preserves the mystery (the divine and the human), and safeguards their distinctness (people and hierarchy). However, in ecclesial practice (not ontology or metaphysics), the tension remains unsettled. We can sense that the proposals provide only a “new description” to an old and aging ecclesiological problem. Consequently, they only temporarily relieve us, but do not completely settle the tension. The tension re-emerges in the Extraordinary Synod of 1985. In fact, in that Synod, the *communio* model is officially adopted as the official ecclesiology, thereby, corners the Vatican II People of God ecclesiology. In his study, Saldanha observes that the synod concentrated on the divine communion of the people of God, and relegated the human communion of the community. Furthermore, it avoids the question on the structural organization of the church. He argues that any communion without the People of God cannot stand.<sup>13</sup>

### **3.2. Democratization Model<sup>14</sup>**

Democratic practices are never alien to the history of Christianity. It has existed in the early Christian community. The early Christians were believers in the risen Christ, to Jesus who proclaimed the kingdom of God, and they tried to witness that kingdom on earth. However, historically, the monarchical and pyramidal model has

---

<sup>13</sup>John Baptist Saldanha, *The Church as a Communion: A Study of the Synod of 1985* (M.A. Thesis, K.U. Leuven, 1997), 90-92.

<sup>14</sup>Democratization model is also referred to as pneumatological model of the church. “Pneuma” means the Spirit of the Lord.

overwhelmed these democratic practices. The proponents of the Democratization model, to name a few, are Leonardo Boff and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.

### **3.2.1. Leonardo Boff: Reinvention of the Church**

Employing the hermeneutic circle, Boff, came out with his ecclesiology. In the hermeneutic circle, two worlds are in dialogue, namely the world of the text and the world of the reader. When a person reads a text (bible), s/he brings into the text his/her experience. His/her experience is therefore integral part of the interpretive act or meaning generation. In the case of a dialogue between the historical Jesus and the Latin American basic communities, Boff proposes a church "from below". By rediscovering the central message of Jesus, that is, the Kingdom of God interpreted as the liberation of the oppressed people, the church must be configured to the historical Jesus and also proclaim the same message.<sup>15</sup> The Kingdom must be historically realized among the poor people of God. They must be liberated from their oppression.

With the emergence of the base communities in Latin America, the poor people are rediscovering their place in the history of salvation and experiencing the intervention of God in their behalf. This realization makes them truly people of God, where God is in communion with their cause, their suffering and their struggle. A new church is therefore being born. Boff termed it ecclesiogenesis, where the grassroots themselves are reinventing the church.<sup>16</sup>

Considering the influence of Marxist analysis, liberation theologians return to the historical Jesus and the message of the Kingdom of God. Like in the Exodus experience, the God of history is on the side of the oppressed people. The poor are struggling in order to attain their utopia, a world liberated from all forms of evils. The institutional church is not exempted from a social critique of the theology of liberation. What historically evolved, as an institutional church was the monarchical and pyramidal model of the West, where the clergy have been the privileged class. The church is then part of the suprastructures that oppress the people. The institutional church obsessed with the power ideology must be liberated from this pathology. With the inspiration of the historical Jesus and the Spirit,

---

<sup>15</sup>See Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, New York: Orbis Books, 1978.

<sup>16</sup>See Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis*, New York: Orbis Books, 1986.

the grassroots being people of God are re-structuring the church. Re-structuring is towards the aim of democratization.<sup>17</sup>

With ecclesio-genesis, the structure of the church will no longer be the old monarchical or pyramidal model, where the church is seen in the polarity of Christ/church, with the emphasis on its juridical vision, where Christ transmits all his power to the apostles and their successors. It will now be a democratic one. In this democratic model, the clergy are recognizing the presence of the Spirit shaping the church before the arrival of the institutional church. With this in mind, we can discover the ongoing re-creation of the church and the richness of the mystery in the midst of the people. The clergy are no longer separate or distant from the people. They are in solidarity with their causes, sufferings and struggles. The basic church communities are aiding the whole church to transform its old mindsets, its structures and its mission. It will truly be the people of God.

### **3.2.2. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza: Discipleship of Equals**

With the tool of hermeneutic of suspicion, Fiorenza proposes her ekklesia-logy. In the hermeneutics of suspicion, we are questioning some basic assumptions and underlying presuppositions of certain truth-claim.<sup>18</sup> As a starting point, she critically analyzes the experience of women in the church and society, and the biblical origins of the ekklesia. In her analysis, she discovers that women have been excluded historically. They have suffered from a long history of patriarchy in church and society. She is now trying to reclaim the rightful place of women and reaffirm their right. According to her analysis, Christian feminism is engaged in the struggle to transform the patriarchal church into the ekklesia understood as a discipleship of equals.

In her linguistic analysis, she argues that the translation of ekklesia/assembly into kyriake/church has privileged the kyriarchal/hierarchical form of the church. The original meaning of ekklesia would be best rendered as "public assembly of the political community" or as "democratic assembly of free citizens," where women can participate in decision-making. However, with the dominance of patriarchy, the ekklesia of women is as much a future hope, as it is a reality today. In the discipleship of equals, baptism is

---

<sup>17</sup>Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power*.

<sup>18</sup>Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Bible, the Global Context and the Discipleship of Equals," in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, ed. Rebecca B. Chopp & Mark Lewis Taylor, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994, 87-97.

the sacrament that makes people equal. Commitment to the discipleship of equals, the ekklesia of women are resisting all forms of patriarchal oppression and reclaiming the vision of the ekklesia. Only then is the Gospel proclaimed in the whole world.<sup>19</sup>

She explains that ekklesia as a discipleship of equals can make present the basilea, the alternative world of liberation proclaimed by Jesus. Like Jesus, the disciples of the basilea are called to proclaim the "Goodnews" of the basilea. The discipleship of equals must be a basilea discipleship. The Jewish basilea vision of the Gospels, which constitutes the mission and reason for any ecclesial existence, cannot be adequately proclaimed and realized in a patriarchal church. Rather such vision can be actualized and affirmed only in a space where women are liberated from patriarchy. Consequently Christian feminists must first reclaim the ekklesia.<sup>20</sup> Ekklesia seeks to expose and to redress women's oppression in society and church. Feminists seek to break the structures of oppression that have silenced and excluded them from decision-making, and prevented them from asking their own theological questions and articulating their theology. She is therefore advocating an ekklesia-logy.

With this discipleship of equals, the only structure suited to it is what she calls, "radical democracy." This radical democracy can be detected or traced from the praxis of the discipleship of equals inscribed in biblical and theological ecclesial practices that allow for a reconceptualization of that "radical democracy" in the early Christian missionary movements that practiced "the equality of the Spirit."<sup>21</sup>

Let me now summarize. Unlike the *communio* model, the democratization model calls for re-structuring of the Catholic Church, which has been heavily hierarchical and patriarchal. Both Boff and Fiorenza are pushing for liberation from oppression of the poor and of women. This model does not only call for good theologizing, but a radical restructuring of the Church hierarchy. They confront the real issue that has been evaded.

With the use of hermeneutic tools, they were equipped with a critical reinterpretation of the Catholic Church. These tools make us

---

<sup>19</sup>Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, London: SMC Press Ltd, 1993, xxxii & 344-351.

<sup>20</sup>Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation*, New York: Crossroad, 1993, 12.

<sup>21</sup>Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Bible, the Global Context, and the Discipleship of Equals," 89-94.

aware of the historical nature of reality and the ideological nature of our knowledge (and interest). It is then understandable why the problem is evaded, rather than naming it. We must let go of power and work for the Kingdom of God.

#### 4. The Question of Power

However, instead of listening to the clamour of democratization, the official church becomes more resistant to it. The response of the church tends to be an “aggressive recentralization of authority” in the church.<sup>22</sup> The argument has been reasserted that the church is “from above,” and “not from below.” This means that the church was and is divinely instituted. It is God who wills it and not men (I used the word advisedly). However, the Vatican absolutism can neither be justified historically nor theologically. With the attitude of the Vatican officials, the only last recourse left to effect change in the hierarchy is a “systematic subversion of hierarchical power.” According to Ruether, subversion means, “turning things around from below.” She elaborates that though the church hierarchy justifies itself from above, it is still dependent on assent to its power and economic support from below. It is precisely at this point of assent and economic support that Catholics need to subvert hierarchical power.<sup>23</sup>

Clearly then, the conflicting ecclesiologies have strained the relationship between the official authority in the church and some well-respected theologians in the church. However, the issue is not just the church hierarchy but the increasing “crisis of authority” in a global scale. People worldwide are clamouring for more democratization. The church being part of the world is not exempted from this clamour. To solve the crisis or conflict that we are facing in the church, we need not develop better theological arguments, but to identify the problem which generates long-standing tensions and conflicts. Obrist identifies the problem as the *potestas sacra*. *Potestas sacra* refers to the privileges of power of the church hierarchy. It is the main hindrance to the democratization of the church. He then suggests the removal of the *potestas sacra*.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup>John F. Kane, “Roman Catholicism and the Contemporary Crisis of Authority,” in *The Exercise of the Primacy: Continuing the Dialogue*, ed. Phyllis Zagano & Terrence W. Tilley, New York: A Crossroad Herder Book, 1998, 66.

<sup>23</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Differing Views of the Church,” in *Authority, Community and Conflict*, ed. Madonna Kolbenschlag, Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1986, 106.

<sup>24</sup>Willy Obrist, “A Consecrated Hierarchy – An Obstacle to a Democratizing of the Catholic Church,” in *Concilium* (1992/5) 27-29.

With the emergence of a third magisterium, what Aloysius Pieris calls, *magisterium of the poor*,<sup>25</sup> the controversy becomes more acute. The poor come from the third world societies where majority of Catholics belongs and the liberation theologies are popular (such as the continents of Asia, Africa and Latin America). The masses, who have become non-humans in the underside of history, as Gustavo Gutierrez calls them, become the privileged locus of the act of theologizing. However, we would like to expand the notion of the poor here. The poor include all the victims of exclusion and subjugation in the society. The poor who have been historically marginalized are now beginning to be awakened from their oppression, voicing out their “theology of suffering” and struggling to assert their liberation.

With the rise of the third magisterium the teaching authority of believers finds its location in the *sensus fidei* (the sense of the faith). The *sensus fidei* of the whole church is much richer, more differentiated, and more active than the statements of the magisterium by themselves. What sustains the life of the church is not only the statements of the magisterium, but also the gifts or charisms of the Holy Spirit, who inspires not only church leaders but also the whole community.<sup>26</sup> In ecclesial physiology, the *sensus fidei* plays a decisive and creative role. The role of the magisterium is limited to authentication and confirmation of the faith.<sup>27</sup> However, church structures can constrain the faith of the people. This structural problem can be seen as a religious monarchy overwhelming the beginnings of religious democracy in the Catholic Church.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup>See Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism*, New York: Orbis Books, 1988.

<sup>26</sup>Richard Penaskovic, “Theology and Authority: The Theological Issues,” in *Theology and Authority: The Theological Issues*, ed. Richard Penaskonovic, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987, 121.

<sup>27</sup>There are three technical terms employed in the indefectibility of the church, namely *sensus fidei* (sense of faith) and under it, we have *sensus fidelium* (especially used in the Council of Trent) and *consensus fidelium* (especially used in the Vatican II). The *sensus fidei* is a gift of grace of the Spirit given to and received by the people of God. Whereas, the *sensus fidelium* (sense or mind of the people) refers not to the people, but to the belief; *consensus fidelium* (agreement of the faithful) refers to the situation in which, on a particular issue, the people decide and agree on it. See: Francis A. Sullivan, SJ, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1983.

<sup>28</sup>Eugene C. Bianchi, “A Democratic Church: Task for the Twenty-first Century,” in *A Democratic Roman Catholic Church: The Reconstruction of Roman Catholicism*, ed. Eugene C. Bianchi & Rosemary Radford Ruether, New York: Crossroad, 1992, 34-49.

The future of the church depends basically on a new way of conceiving church structures. The task of the church is then to rethink the structures of the church and reflect on its particular social practices. The Holy Spirit guides the people of God. Creativity is the expression of the Holy Spirit, who is acting in the local churches and enabling them to develop some relevant structures. The structures of the church depend largely on the self-understanding of the people of God. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the criterion on the unity of the local churches lies on church structures. On the contrary, the evidence shows a “normative plurality” in the local churches. The unity of the church is understood as multifarious consensus in faith in Jesus Christ, who leads the manifold life of the church into a dialogue where experiences of various local churches can be shared and respected.<sup>29</sup>

## **5. Conclusion: A Plea for Democratization**

We need to confront the real problem facing the church. I concur with the alternative of the democratization model. We need to enact some relevant structures of consultation, collaboration, accountability, due process, participation and dialogue in a genuine community of sisters and brothers.<sup>30</sup> To democratize means to decentralize power structures of the church and to empower the people. These democratic practices are deeply rooted in the Catholic traditions from its earliest sources; unfortunately, some of these sources have been ignored, suppressed or forgotten.<sup>31</sup>

Here, I take the advice of Schillebeeckx, that in confronting the church, we need not fear its consequences; rather, we need to be honest to God in our commitment to the people of God. The Gospel is the only normative rule of ecclesial life, where the whole people of God are subjected.<sup>32</sup> We must think of the well being of the whole people of God, rather than defend a self-serving ideological interest. When social structures become obsolete and irrelevant, they become dehumanizing to people and constraining to the creativity of the Holy Spirit. We must understand that social structures are historical

---

<sup>29</sup>Walter Kirchschräger, “Plurality and Creativity in Church Structure,” *Theological Digest*, 45, 3 (Fall 1998) 246-253.

<sup>30</sup>John A. Coleman, SJ, “Not Democracy but Democratization,” in *A Democratic Roman Catholic Church: The Reconstruction of Roman Catholicism*, ed. Eugene C. Bianchi & Rosemary Radford Ruether, New York: Crossroad, 1992, 229-234.

<sup>31</sup>Eugene C. Bianchi, “A Democratic Church,” 34.

<sup>32</sup>Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church, the Human Story of God*, London: SMC Press, 1990, 189-228.

products and constructs. The presently dominant monarchical or pyramidal structures of the church, I would hazard to say, do not necessarily come from God or are inspired by the Holy Spirit, rather, they are part of a long historical development in the world. Thus, we must not reify or “fetishize” these structures. We must devise some structures that are more enabling to the people God. These enabling structures, in the present state of affairs, can only be made by democratizing the structures of the church. We must think that we need one another in the building up of the people of God and in witnessing to the Kingdom of God.

In opting for a democratized church, I am not saying that we need to get rid of the structures of the church. I am only saying that we need some structures that are responsive to the needs of the people. These structures are historically contingent and therefore they can change as the needs arise. People usually fear changes because of the consequences that they will bring. They become secured with the antiquated structures. We need to accept that we are uncertain of many things. What we hold on is our trust in the promise made by Jesus, that the Spirit of truth will abide with us. The leadership of the church must pay attention to the signs of the times and to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, where God reveals himself in our history and humanity.

LG cannot be received singularly. It is received in various interpretations. The different interpretations are based on the particular experience of the local churches. This human experience enters into the reading of the text. There is a dialogical encounter between these two worlds, the text and the reader.<sup>33</sup> So the reading of LG among the third world societies are hermeneutically legitimate. To name one, the liberation theologies in the third world societies usher in a new way of self-understanding of the church and doing ecclesiology. Being church is not so much a following of what the church authorities teach, but what the believers find in the gospels as speaking to their concrete situations of poverty and oppression. A re-reading and rediscovery of the gospel message within their situation brings new insights and different concerns. Being church then would mean a community inspired and directed by the gospel in a particular situation. What is demanded in this particular situation is a concrete re-structuring and re-orientation of the church.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, what

---

<sup>33</sup>Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, New York: Orbis Books, 1976, 8-9.

<sup>34</sup>Kafoa Solomone, “The People of God in Vatican II,” 494-5.

we need to implement in this situation is a global solidarity with the crucified people of the third world societies and with the victims of widespread patriarchal structures. What is urgently needed is a basic trust in the capability and the knowledgeable ability of the people of God. The Vatican cannot know everything of what is going on to the churches in many parts of the world, especially the poor and women, including the children who depend on women. The people know better their situation. Given the democratic space in the church, the people can contribute to the betterment and enrichment of the church. However, trust cannot be established when power relations are asymmetrical and unjust. Trust can only be developed in the spirit of openness and responsibility. This openness and responsibility require a sharing of power to the people. When power is shared, people can freely participate and become accountable. This would diversify the church' self-understanding. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, people can share their charisms.

To conclude, in this paper, I have shown the tensions in LG, and the corresponding struggles between conflicting ecclesiologies. However, these tensions and the struggles are not just in the text, they are also found in our ecclesial practices and concrete experiences today. I look at these happenings positively, that we will never change, or will ever effect change without these tensions and struggles that provoke and facilitate it. We hope that these tensions and struggles are creative and healthy, that is, that they will push for a better church. *What I have continuously insisted and believed is the argument that democratization is the conditio sine qua non of an authentic communion of the people of God.* We always trust the Holy Spirit to accompany us in this endeavour. Echoing the strong words of Swindler: "The church ought to be a democracy," and he ended, "only in this way we can bring about the kratia of the demos theou – the ecclesia in dialogue " (emphasis added).<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup>Leonard Swindler, "Demo-kratia, The Rule of the People of God, or *Consensus Fidelium*," in *Authority in the Church*, *Annua Nuntia Louvaniensia* 26, ed. Piet F. Franssen, Leuven: K.U. Leuven Press, 1983, 226-243.