

## VISIONS OF A JUST CHURCH?

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to answer questions about internal justice in the Catholic Church. It addresses Church structure and law in light of Catholic social teaching and the various suggestions and attempts to change or modify Canon Law to allow genuine participation by the people of God, whether through the “preferential option for the poor,” diocesan and parish councils, the wider use of Canon 517 §2 Parish Life Coordinators. In particular it points out the historicity of territorial jurisdiction by women and notes efforts recent by and for women to regain a share in Church governance. Overall, it suggests the possible results of applying Catholic social teaching to the Church structure itself.

**Keywords:** Catholic Social Teaching; Lay Participation; Parish Life Coordinators; Pastoral Councils; Finance Councils; Canon 517 §2

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Two major categories, ecclesiology and social teaching, can be used to structure the vision of a “Just Church.” The two, ecclesiology and Catholic social teaching create a framework for analysing the possibilities for “justice” inside the ecclesia. They can be used to

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examine how Church structure and social teaching affect the so-called “people in the pews.”

### Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic social teaching rightly recognizes the “preferential option for the poor,” so eloquently presented at the Second Episcopal Conference of Latin America (CELAM) at Medellin, Colombia, in 1968. At that CELAM meeting, the attending bishops approved base communities and asked for ways to free the people of God from what they called the “institutionalized violence” of poverty.

Thirty-four years later, by the time the Fifth Latin American Episcopal Conference met in May 2002 in Aparecida, Brazil, the clerical eyes of the Southern Hemisphere were opened even wider. Buenos Aires’ Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was on the meeting’s document drafting committee, and the Fifth CELAM stressed the need for an inclusive Christ-centred Church that reached to the edges of humanity.<sup>2</sup>

While the 2002 CELAM document stressed the preferential option for the poor, presented a deep concern for the environment, and recognized the need to respect popular cultural devotions (especially Marian devotions) its English translation referred to the Church as “she.”<sup>3</sup> No matter the linguistic arguments, such remains a point of irritation with some. The usage to this date remains in all Vatican documents.

The enduring question is whether the quarrel is with translators or with the authors. The original Italian title of Pope Francis’s October 2020 encyclical was and remains *Fratelli tutti—Brothers all*, a title defended by the Vatican Press Office. The title is taken from a writing of Saint Francis of Assisi to his friars, and no matter the possible inclusiveness in Italian usage, *fratelli* means “brothers.”<sup>4</sup>

It is important to recall the linguistic backdrop to Catholic social teaching. Two papal encyclicals: Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* (1891)

<sup>2</sup>Pope Francis’s *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), *Laudato Si’* (2015) and *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) all refer to or borrow from the document.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.celam.org/aparecida/Ingles.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup>*Admonitions of Saint Francis*, No. 6 “The Imitation of the Lord. 1. Let all of us, brothers, look to the Good Shepherd Who suffered the passion of the Cross to save his sheep. 2. The sheep of the Lord followed him in tribulation and persecution, in insult and hunger, in infirmity and temptation, and in everything else and they have received everlasting life from the Lord because of these things. 3. Therefore, it is a great shame for us, servants of God, that while the saints [actually] did such things, we wish to receive glory and honor by [merely] recounting their deeds.” <https://www.franciscans.ie/the-writings-of-st-francis/#7>

and John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* (1991) collect and affirm Catholic social teachings in light of their respective eras, presenting seven principles or categories guiding the practice of justice in the Church.

But, what is justice? Most dictionaries look internally to the word: justice is a moral principle, one that guides conduct. The conduct it guides is "just conduct." The seven categories of Catholic social teaching attempt to outline and define "just conduct," and their usual definitions are helpful:

1. *Life and Dignity of the Human Person*—this foundational consideration focuses on the sacredness of human life, on the fact of personal dignity. Every institution is measured according to how it treats individuals.

2. *Solidarity*—here, the Church teaches that one human family is called to peace, which is only attainable through justice.

3. *Care for God's Creation*—the aching planet sustains all; the Church, especially in recent years with papal encyclicals and episcopal synods, has reawakened this understanding.

4. *Call to Family, Community, and Participation*—the implication is that individuals have the right to form families, that families are the basic social institutions of the world, and that all persons have the right to participate in the wider society.

5. *Option for the Poor and Vulnerable*—here, the needs of the poor and vulnerable are held out as necessary to be protected.

6. *Rights and Responsibilities*—following on the needs of the poor, the rights and responsibilities of all persons are to be respected, and all persons have the fundamental right to things necessary for human decency.

7. *Dignity of Work and Rights of Workers*—here, the Church asserts its right to criticize economic structures that abuse both workers and consumers. The Church supports the rights of individuals to create unions, to receive fair wages, to maintain private property, and to keep the fruits of their own economic initiatives.

Most times, Catholic social teaching is applied to the world "out there"—the great expanse of people and lands hugging the Earth.

What happens when the Church—the people of God—tries to determine what the "Just Church" might look like? How is justice then defined? These questions must be considered to determine what a "just Church" is and implies.

It is a truism to say that a value of Christianity is to give voice to the voiceless. But too many members of the Church have no voice. Too many members of the Church have no say. Too many members of the Church speak in whispers. Too many members of the Church walk away.

### **Participation in the Governance of the Catholic Church**

Legally, it is impossible for laity to actively share in the governance of the Catholic Church. No matter the external groups and organizations seeking justice, whether for those abused or for unfairly accused clergy, the people of God do not have and cannot have jurisdictional power in the Church.

Canon 129 §1 of the revised, 1983 Code of Canon Law states that “In accord with the prescriptions of law, those who have received sacred orders are capable of the power of governance, which exists in the Church by divine institution and is also called the power of jurisdiction.” Canon 129 §2 states that lay persons can “cooperate in the exercise of this...power” – the power of governance or jurisdiction.

The long process of revising the Code of Canon Law was the result of Pope John XXIII’s announced desire to update the 1917 Code during the time of the Second Vatican Council. Three popes and twenty years later, the new Code was promulgated in 1983.

Overall, the 1983 Code appears to affirm the rights, duties, and equality of all Christians, following the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* No. 32<sup>5</sup>, which cites Scripture as supporting the baptismal equality of all Christians. *Lumen Gentium* 32 is often considered the precursor to the 1983 Code’s Canon 208, which reads: “From their rebirth in Christ, there exists among all the Christian faithful a true equality regarding dignity and action by which they all cooperate in the building up of the Body of Christ according to each one’s own condition and function.” But the operative word in Canon 208 is “cooperate.”

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<sup>5</sup>LG, 32. By divine institution Holy Church is ordered and governed with a wonderful diversity. “For just as in one body we have many members, yet all the members have not the same function, so we, the many, are one body in Christ, but severally members one of another.” Therefore, the chosen People of God is one: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism”; sharing a common dignity as members from their regeneration in Christ, having the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection; possessing in common one salvation, one hope and one undivided charity. There is, therefore, in Christ and in the Church no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex, because “there is neither Jew nor Greek: there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female. For you are all ‘one’ in Christ Jesus” (Citing Rom 12:4-5; Eph 4-5; Gal 3:28 and Col 3.11).

During the time of the Code's revision, there was a recommendation for lay participation that did not depend on sacred orders for the powers of governance. In fact, in the spirit of *Lumen Gentium* 32, the first approved language for Canon 129 §2 was that lay persons could share (*partem habere*), as opposed to cooperate (*cooperari*) in the exercise of power (*potestas*).

When Canon 129 first came to a vote during the 1981 *Plenaria* on the Code, 52 members of the drafting committee voted to include laity in jurisdiction, and 9 voted for exclusion. However, two principal schools—the “German school” and the “Roman school”—continued to oppose each other. As it happened, the so-called “German school” prevailed, weakening the text approved in the 1981 *Plenaria* on the new Code, replacing “*partem habere*” with “*cooperari*.”<sup>6</sup> The single sentence restricting lay persons from any Church-wide jurisdiction was written by then-Archbishop Joseph Ratzinger, and approved exactly as so written with the exception of a comma.<sup>7</sup>

Hence, Canon 129 §2 regarding the “power of governance...also called the power of jurisdiction,” as approved and promulgated in 1983, reads: “Lay members of the Christian faithful can cooperate in the exercise of this same power according to the norm of law.”

The only jurisdictional powers for lay persons, male or female, remains within religious orders and institutes. There, superiors have some powers of governance and jurisdiction, but solely within their orders and institutes.<sup>8</sup>

To be clear: the giving over of real authority, of the powers of jurisdiction or the powers of governance within the Church at large to laity, is impossible according to canon law.

### **Lay Activism and Dr Anne Soupa**

Even so, lay people and their supporters continue to search for avenues of authority and consequent jurisdiction. In March 2020,

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<sup>6</sup>Elizabeth McDonough, “Jurisdiction Exercised by Non-Ordained Members in Religious Institutes,” *Canon Law Society of America Proceedings* 58 (1996) 292–307.

<sup>7</sup>McDonough, “Jurisdiction...” Ratzinger was, at the time, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a position he held for 23 years, from 1982 to 2005, when he was elected Pope Benedict XVI. McDonough refers to Cardinal Ratzinger’s *animadversiones* and suggested text of December 22, 1980, in *Congregatio Plenaria*, 294, fn. 4.

<sup>8</sup>Essentially, to establish internal divisions and erect and suppress houses within their institutes, which they may represent; to admit, exclastrate, release from temporary vows, and dismiss members (Canons 118, 581, 609, 616, 609, 634, 635, 638, 647, 656, 658, 686, 689, 699, as outlined by McDonough, 306).

Cardinal Philippe Barbarin resigned as archbishop of Lyon, France despite the fact that his civil conviction for failing to report priestly sexual abuse had been overturned a few months prior. Soon after, French writer and activist Dr Anne Soupa applied to be archbishop.<sup>9</sup> In 2008, along with magazine editor Christine Pedotti, Dr Soupa formed a committee called *Comité de la Jupe*—“The Skirt Committee”—after then-archbishop of Paris André Vingt-Trois commented on *Radio Notre-Dame* about women reading in Church. He said, “The hardest part is having women who are trained. It’s not enough to wear a skirt. You must have something in your head.”<sup>10</sup>

Some 17,000 persons signed a petition to make Dr Soupa the next archbishop of Lyon, a position eventually filled in December 2020 by Ajaccio Bishop Olivier de Germay, a former paratrooper and priest of the Archdiocese of Toulouse.<sup>11</sup>

Elsewhere, other French women have applied for posts traditionally open only to male clerics. One group—called *Toutes Apôtres!*—states in its manifesto: “Long and painful have been the decades during which baptized Catholic women have politely asked for real equality within their church. They are not received; hardly listened to ... And still we are being asked to be patient.”<sup>12</sup>

### Canon Law and Deacons

The calls for women to be included in the hierarchical power structure in the Church collide with the fact that priesthood is the principal, perhaps only, avenue to jurisdiction and authority. The roots of priestly power in France or anywhere else reach back to the *Decretum Gratiani*, Gratian’s 12<sup>th</sup> century *Decretals*, or book of laws. Gratian was a monk and canon lawyer from Bologna, Italy whose sources are contemporaneous or nearly so to his writing. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, all powers of jurisdiction and governance in the secular

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<sup>9</sup>Soupa would be an excellent candidate for the position but for her age—she is 73—and her gender. She holds a doctorate in theology and a master’s degree in law, and she worked for many years at Éditions du Cerf, the French publishing house owned by the Dominican Order.

<sup>10</sup> <https://novenanews.com/female-candidate-archbishop-lyon-soupa-women-church/>; <https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/catholic-womens-group-in-france-launches-petition/9757>; <https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/a-woman-archbishop-for-lyon/12629>; <https://toutesapotres.fr/english/>

<sup>11</sup>Ajaccio is in southwest Corsica, <https://www.france24.news/en/2020/12/lyon-the-new-archbishop-of-the-diocese-officially-took-office-in-front-of-300-people-lyon-mag.html>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/30/women-are-future-of-catholic-church-anne-soupa-leads-renewed-fight-for-female-ordination>

Church were held by clerics, while internal powers of jurisdiction and governance remained within abbeys and monasteries.

Abbesses of European monasteries, many if not most of whom were ordained deacons, had specific territorial authority. Beginning in the seventh century, popes and bishops began to overrule women's abbatial territorial authority, until it was mostly eliminated during the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup>

Intertwined with questions of jurisdictional authority outside abbeys and monasteries was the fact that deacons were becoming increasingly powerful. Roman priests in particular envied the power of deacons and especially envied the power of the archdeacon.<sup>14</sup> In Rome, and elsewhere, a powerful diaconate controlled the Church's finances, and often and even eventually deacons controlled the Church—that is, the diocese—itsself. More often than not, for many years, the next bishop, even the next bishop of Rome, was chosen from among the deacons, not from among the priests. Of thirty-seven popes elected between the years 432 and 684, until the end of the seventh century, only three were priests.<sup>15</sup> Even in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, an archdeacon, Thomas Becket (1119/20-1170), was chosen archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the Middle Ages, governance gradually solidified in the upper clerical ranks. The performance of sacramental ministry became increasingly restricted, particularly where juridical authority was folded into the sacred action. Notably, as the juridical authority of bishops was repeatedly asserted, both the anointing of the sick and the hearing of confession and granting of absolution became more and more restricted. Eventually, as today, the faculties for anointing and penance are given by diocesan bishops solely to priests.

By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Gratian had codified in his *Decretals* what the priests of Rome argued for: no one would be ordained a deacon unless he (and only he) was on the path toward priesthood. The

<sup>13</sup>The one exception was the Abbess of Las Huelgas, Spain, who maintained her territorial authority well into the nineteenth century until it was eliminated in 1873 by Pope Pius IX with the Bull *Quae Diversa*. Up until that time, the abbesses of Las Huelgas granted sacramental and preaching faculties and maintained full ecclesiastical jurisdiction within her lands.

<sup>14</sup>In the Latin Church, originally the senior-most deacon, who held administrative power over the diocese.

<sup>15</sup>Peter Llewellyn, "The Popes and the Constitution in the Eighth Century," *English Historical Review* 101: CCCXCVIII (January 1986) 42-67, at 42.

<sup>16</sup>Becket was ordained priest on June 2, 1162 and was consecrated bishop on June 3, 1162 by Henry of Blois Bishop of Winchester.

Decretals marked the solidification of the practice of the *cursus honorum*, ordered entry to the minor orders following tonsure of lector, porter, exorcist, acolyte, and the major orders of subdeacon, deacon, priest. As the diaconate as a permanent vocation was eliminated, so coincidentally did the diaconate of women effectively die out, even within women's abbeys and monasteries.

### Congregation for the Clergy and Priests

In order to safeguard the determinations of the Council of Trent, in 1564 Pius IV established the *Sacra Congregatio Cardinalium Concilii Tridentini interpretum*,<sup>17</sup> renamed the Congregation for the Clergy by Paul VI in 1967,<sup>18</sup> and, according to the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor bonus* (1988), responsible for the oversight of Cathedral Chapters, Pastoral Councils, Presbyteral Councils, and Parishes, among other charges.<sup>19</sup>

On June 29, 2020, the Congregation for the Clergy published an Instruction entitled: "The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelising Mission of the Church."<sup>20</sup> The Instruction solidifies the authority of the Parish Priest (the pastor).

While *Querida Amazonia*, Pope Francis's Apostolic Exhortation in response to the *Final Document* from the Synod for the Pan-Amazon Region, emphasizes the possibility of lay persons (including women religious) and deacons managing parish life, the Congregation for Clergy emphasizes that no matter what, a priest and only a priest can have canonical authority – that is, jurisdiction – in any given parish or parish grouping.

For those who wish to participate in governance rather than simply cooperate, the document begins hopefully enough. The document's Introduction speaks of the reorganization of parishes and cites Pope Francis's call to "creativity" in "seeking how best to proclaim the Gospel." The document speaks of "a valuable opportunity for pastoral conversion that is essentially missionary" (Paragraphs, 1, 2).

The Instruction describes the rights and responsibilities of the Parish Priest (usually understood as the pastor) and Parochial Vicars,

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<sup>17</sup>Pius IV, Apostolic Constitution *Alias Nos*, August 2, 1564.

<sup>18</sup>Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution *Regimini Ecclesiae Universae*, August 15, 1967.

<sup>19</sup>John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus*, June 28, 1988.

<sup>20</sup><http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/07/20/200720a.html>



and then (in descending order) the Deacons, Consecrated men and women, and the Laity of the parish.

Then, the document considers Canon 517 §2, which Pope Francis highlighted in *Querida Amazonia*, and which allows diocesan bishops to appoint non-priest Parish Life Coordinators. The document from the Congregation for the Clergy asserts that parish Life Coordinators are merely a temporary solution and not, to be sure, an example of their exercise of governance. The appointment of a Parish Life Coordinator is for “*participatio in exercitio curae pastoralis* (participation in the exercise of pastoral care) and not for directing, coordinating, moderating, or governing the Parish” because “these competencies...are the competencies of a priest alone” (Paragraph, 89).

Worldwide statistics seem to support bishops’ reluctance to assign parish management to deacons or lay ecclesial ministers. The latest *Statistical Yearbook of the Church* reports only 2,220 Parish Life Coordinators for some 176,082 parishes worldwide without a Parish Priest.<sup>21</sup>

Most Asian and Latin American dioceses have only a handful of Parish Life Coordinators. Asia’s 19,818 pastor-less parishes have 334 Parish Life Coordinators. In the Amazon region, considered specifically by Pope Francis in *Querida Amazonia*, two-thirds of pastor-less parishes are managed by women religious, very few of whom are Parish Life Coordinators. The nine Amazon region countries’ 20,192 pastor-less parishes collectively have 124 Parish Life Coordinators.<sup>22</sup>

Hopeful as the pope’s call may or may not be, the apparent preference of many bishops is the twinning, grouping, or even closing of parishes where a permanent Parish Priest cannot be found.

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<sup>21</sup>There is a relatively large application of Canon 517 §2 in the United States, where 337 of some 13,606 parishes without a resident Parish Priest are entrusted to non-priest Parish Life Coordinators, these comprising 131 deacons, 17 men and 56 women religious, and 133 lay persons. Throughout Asia, some 19,818 parishes are without a resident Parish Priest, of which 16 are entrusted to deacons, 81 to lay men religious, 111 to women religious, and 126 to lay persons. *Statistical Yearbook of the Church*, Vatican City, 2017, 59–62.

<sup>22</sup>Throughout Asia, some 19,818 parishes are without a resident Parish Priest, of which 16 are entrusted to deacons, 81 to lay men religious, 111 to women religious, and 126 to lay persons. In Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guiana, Guyana, Peru and Venezuela, and Suriname, 19 parishes are entrusted to deacons, 3 entrusted to non-priest men religious, 86 to women religious, 16 to secular lay persons. *Statistical Yearbook of the Church*, Vatican City, 2017, 59–62.

## Participate in the Guidance of the Catholic Church

Would a “Just Church” create space for greater participation in governance? The recent Instruction from the Congregation for Clergy includes “service in the evangelizing mission of the Church” in its long title and seems to indicate that bishops and others should encourage lay participation. The Instruction points to the call for “Christian communities [to] be ever more centres conducive to an encounter with Christ” (Paragraph, 3).

Unfortunately, the Church’s movement toward lay participation, even consultation, has been neither smooth nor direct. Not every attempt at Church-wide regulations has been successful, and those regulations that do exist may not always be applied. For example, the Instruction from the Congregation for Clergy notes specific parish bodies it calls “Bodies of Ecclesial Co-responsibility.” These, the parish Finance Council and the parish Pastoral Council are noteworthy, on paper. But each is a body controlled by the Parish Priest.

The Parish Priest establishes the Finance Council and, unless the diocesan bishop directs that its members be elected, the Parish Priest chooses its members. Likewise, the Parish Priest establishes the Pastoral Council, but only if the diocesan bishop requires one. While Pope Francis has made his preference for Pastoral Councils well known, they are not required, despite the details within this latest Instruction.

What is certain, as noted in the Instruction, is that:

The Parish Pastoral Council ‘possesses a consultative vote only’ in the sense that its proposals must be accepted favourably by the Parish Priest to become operative. The Parish Priest is then bound to consider the indications of the Parish Council attentively especially if they express themselves unanimously, in a process of common discernment (Para, 113, citing Canon 536 §2).<sup>23</sup>

To be clear, there is no legal requirement in the Roman Catholic Church for the diocesan bishop to have a Pastoral Council for his diocese, or for him to require individual parishes to have Pastoral Councils. And Canon Law states that where it exists, “A pastoral

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<sup>23</sup>Can. 536 §1. If the diocesan bishop judges it opportune after he has heard the presbyteral council, a pastoral council is to be established in each parish, over which the pastor presides and in which the Christian faithful, together with those who share in pastoral care by virtue of their office in the parish, assist in fostering pastoral activity. §2. A pastoral council possesses a consultative vote only and is governed by the norms established by the diocesan bishop.

council possesses a consultative vote only and is governed by the norms established by the diocesan bishop” (Canon 536 §2).

Unfortunately, too often a vibrant parish community is squashed when the bishop decides to close the parish, rather than turn it over to lay leadership. Meanwhile, the number of stories about healthy parish life destroyed by unsuitable choices of Parish Priests continues to grow.

The formal lay “guidance” offered where the bishop decides to have his own Pastoral Council and where he requires parish Pastoral Councils comes from the very few parishioners who—for one reason or another—are in the good graces of the clergy. Should the Parish Council members refuse to be “rubber stamps” for clerical preferences, they may choose to stay—and be ignored—or to leave. They may choose as well to leave the parish or even the Church.

Their opportunities for counsel and guidance cut off, disgruntled parishioners may choose to affiliate with any number of consultative groups that seek to be heard. While those on the inside—bishops and other clerics—often warn against political action in Church matters, too often there seems no other choice.

Even so, such activities and actions, at least insofar as they are directed at underscoring Gospel values (whether inside or outside the Church), are healthy. In the last century in the United States, the great peace activist Dorothy Day (1897-1980) printed a newspaper she sold for a penny a copy. She made a difference.

Today, the explosion of social media outlets allows anyone to have a voice. The problem becomes: How to rise above the noise, to be noticed, and to give guidance to the Church?

## **Discernment**

There is a very delicate balance to be struck. The first imperative in offering guidance is to determine to whom it should be offered. With or without Pastoral Councils, wise diocese bishops and Parish Priests listen to the voices around them.

If the diocesan bishops and Parish Priests are to make decisions, they will (or at least ought to) listen and enter into deep and prayerful discernment. A wise bishop told me once that:

Discernment is not an organizational technique and not even a passing fashion, but it is an interior attitude rooted in an act of faith. Discernment is the method and at the same time the goal...based on the belief that God

is at work in the history of the world, in the events of life, in the people we meet and speak to us.<sup>24</sup>

The problem seems to rest in finding clerics who recognize history and listen to the people of God.

The question, then, is what does it mean when the laity ask for a “Just Church”? What are they asking for? Undoubtedly, current ecclesiology and Church laws keep all power in the hands of the priestly class. But the secular power of the purse, now combined with the power of social media, presents strong checks and balances to clerical power. Increasingly, it is hard to ignore the obvious.

Swiss theologian Hans Küng wrote the following in 1971, in a book entitled *Why Priests?*:

A multiplicity of opinions, criticism, and opposition have their legitimate place and require a constant dialogue and the constructive display of contrary ideas. In all this the private sphere of every member of the Church should be respected (whether they are *avant-garde* or conservative in nature). In ‘matters of faith and morals’ nothing can be attained with mere votes. In this regard, where it is impossible to obtain some sort of consensus (not unanimity), it is better to leave the question open according to ancient conciliar tradition.<sup>25</sup>

The Church leaves many questions open. Sometimes, however, the Church seems to prefer peace to justice.

### **Application of Social Teachings**

So, can Catholic social teaching be applied internally to the Church as a hierarchical structure? Has absolute clerical power corrupted the hierarchy?<sup>26</sup> What happens when, after examining its strictures regarding governance, after considering the individual and collective responsibility of the people of God to offer guidance, and after they attempt to participate in ecclesial discernment, they also attempt to apply Catholic social teaching inside the hierarchical Church? Would that bring internal justice?

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<sup>24</sup>Private correspondence.

<sup>25</sup>Hans Küng, *Why Priests?* trans. John Cumming, London: William Collins Sons & Co Ltd, 1972, 77.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Lord Acton, “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority: still more when you superadd the tendency or the certainty of corruption by authority. There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it.” John Emerick Edward Dalberg, Letter to Archbishop Mandell Creighton, April 5, 1887.

One question immediately arises: Are things any different today from when Hans Küng wrote in 1971? Without doubt, the “multiplicity of opinions, criticism, and opposition” appearing today should be listened to, even cherished, by bishops and priests. Of course, the people of God cannot vote on matters of faith and morals, but the entire Church can debate what rightly belongs within the categories of social teaching.

What can be changed to meet the times and the needs of the Church, and what can be modified so that the Gospel can be heard, should and must be discussed. Individuals who wish to guide the Church to moderate or modify one or another stance are too often met with an idea of “peace at any price,” so that decisions are delayed for years, even centuries. Individuals who think about some matters that can quite obviously be changed are stuck in a quicksand of opposition that argues nothing can be changed.

Even so, the Church is not as centrist or absolutist as it might seem. Not long ago, 63-year-old Father Johannes Graf von und zu Eltz, of Frankfurt, Germany, speaking about the present German Synod, presented a revolutionary platform. Much of his platform echoed the earliest practices of the Church. Blaming “rigidity” and an “impasse of absolutism,” he warns that the current Church structure simply does not work. His principal suggestions include: 1) laity have a role in selecting diocesan bishops; 2) a modification of the Church’s law on clerical celibacy; 3) internal application of the Church’s social teachings.<sup>27</sup>

The return to the genuine inclusion of laity in the selection of bishops, and the return to the acceptance of married priests throughout the Church, are central to the point of responding to the calls of the people of God. The enduring question relative to the recognition, even recreation, of a “just Church” genuinely depends on the application Catholic social teaching to the Church, to its hierarchical organization. The Church’s essential problems beg for resolution, as follows:

*Life and Dignity of the Human Person*—the life and dignity of people within the Church begins with baptism, and must be respected.

*Solidarity*—the Church is one family, and all members are equal partners in the task of evangelization.

*Care for God’s Creation*—when the Church asks the world to understand the problems of the planet, the people of God have the

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<sup>27</sup><https://novenanews.com/frankfurt-dean-separation-of-powers-in-church/>.

right and the duty to insist that the parish and the diocese participate in its care.

*Call to Family, Community, and Participation*—when the Church argues on behalf of the family, it should consider all types of families, and care for them.

*Option for the Poor and Vulnerable*—the poor and vulnerable have had their voices stifled in the discussion; they must be heard.

*Rights and Responsibilities*—all persons have the right to be respected, all persons have the right and the responsibility to be involved.

*Dignity of Work and Rights of Workers*—the Church itself must be a fair employer.

These are the issues. Certainly, there are more. Yet each needs and deserves, the guidance of the people of God as the Church hierarchy—top to bottom, universal to local—makes decisions and issues policy on behalf of all its members. The presenting problems of ecclesiology might be solved by the Church's internal application of its own social teachings. The answer to the question, the answer to the possibility of envisioning a "Just Church" depends not only on the clerical one per cent, but on all its members.