

# Catholic social teaching finds church leadership lacking



## Article Details

'Leadership does not have all the answers all the time'

South African Bishop Kevin Dowling asks a room of lay Catholics, "Who in today's world even listens to, much less appreciates and allows themselves to be challenged by the leadership of the church? I think the moral authority of the church's leadership has never been weaker." Dowling then critiques church leadership using the lens of Catholic social teaching and find it fails on the principle of subsidiarity.

By Bishop Kevin Dowling



[dowling2.jpg](#) [1]

Bishop Kevin Dowling of Rustenburg, South Africa (CNS file photo)

Following is a talk by Bishop Kevin Dowling of Rustenburg, South Africa. Dowling told *NCR* in a telephone interview today that he gave the talk June 1 to a group of "influential lay Catholics" who meet periodically for lunch in Cape Town. The group, Dowling said, had asked him to speak "on how I view the current state of the church."

"In subsequent conversations, it became clear to me that the group of well-informed Catholic lay leaders wanted an analysis that would be open and very honest," Dowling said July 8. "Given the fact that it would be a select group with no media present, I decided I would be open and honest in my views to initiate debate and discussion."

A reporter, however, was present and what Dowling meant as an "off the record" conversation with lay leaders became local news. Dowling subsequently sent copies of his talk to his fellow South African bishops. *NCR* received a copy of the document and contacted Dowling to verify its authenticity.

Dowling sent *NCR* an original copy of the talk and gave us permission to post it online. Following is the text of Dowling's June 1 talk to lay Catholic leaders in South Africa.

Dowling began the talk by [reading an account](#) [2] by *NCR* Washington correspondent Jerry Filteau about a Latin Mass celebrated in April at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington. Tulsa Bishop Edward Slattery celebrated the Mass, which featured, in Filteau's words, "the *cappa magna*, the 20-yard-long brilliant red train behind a bishop or cardinal that has come to be one of the symbols of the revival of the Tridentine Mass."  
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*The Southern Cross* [South Africa's weekly Catholic newspaper] about 3 or 4 weeks ago published a picture of Bishop Slattery with his "cappa magna". For me, such a display of what amounts to triumphalism in a church torn apart by the sexual abuse scandal, is most unfortunate. What happened there bore the marks of a medieval royal court, not the humble, servant leadership modeled by Jesus. But it seems to me that this is also a symbol of what has been happening in the church especially since pope John Paul II became the Bishop of Rome and up till today -- and that is "restorationism," the carefully planned dismantling of the theology, ecclesiology, pastoral vision, indeed the "opening of the windows" of Vatican II -- in order to "restore" a previous, or more controllable model of church through an increasingly centralized power structure; a structure which now controls everything in the life of the church through a network of Vatican congregations led by cardinals who ensure strict compliance with what is deemed *by them* to be "orthodox." Those who do not comply face censure and punishment, e.g. theologians who are forbidden to teach in Catholic faculties.

Lest we do not highlight sufficiently this important fact. Vatican II was an ecumenical council, i.e., a solemn exercise of the *magisterium* of the church, i.e. the college of bishops gathered together with the bishop of Rome and exercising a teaching function for the whole church. In other words, its vision, its principles and the direction it gave are to be followed and implemented by all, from the pope to the peasant farmer in the fields of Honduras.

Since Vatican II there has been no such similar exercise of teaching authority by the *magisterium*. Instead, a series of decrees, pronouncements and decisions which have been given various "labels" stating, for example, that they must be firmly held to with "internal assent" by the Catholic faithful, but in reality are simply the theological or pastoral interpretations or opinions of those who have power at the centre of the church. They have not been solemnly defined as belonging to the "deposit of the faith" to be believed and followed, therefore, by all Catholics, as with other solemnly proclaimed dogmas. For example, the issues of celibacy for the priesthood and the ordination of women, withdrawn even from the realm of discussion. Therefore, such pronouncements are open to scrutiny -- to discern whether they are in accord, for example, with the fundamental theological vision of Vatican II, or whether there is indeed a case to be made for a different interpretation or opinion.

When I worked internationally from my religious congregation's base in Rome from 1985 to 1990 [Dowling is a Redemptorist] before I came back here as bishop of Rustenburg, one of my responsibilities was the building up of young adult ministry with our communities in the countries of Europe where so many of the young people were alienated from the church. I developed relationships with many hundreds of sincere, searching Catholic young adults, very open to issues of injustice, poverty and misery in the world, aware of structural injustice in the political and economic systems which dominated the world, but who increasingly felt that the "official" church was not only out of touch with reality, but a counter-witness to the aspirations of thinking and aware Catholics who sought a different experience of church. In other words, an experience which enabled them to believe that the church they belonged to had something relevant to say and to witness to in the very challenging world in which they lived. Many, many of these young adults have since left the church entirely.

On the other hand, it has to be recognized that for a significant number of young Catholics, adult Catholics, priests and religious around the world, the "restorationist" model of church which has been implemented over the past 30-40 years is sought after and valued; it meets a need in them; it gives them a feeling of belonging to something with very clear parameters and guidelines for living, thus giving them a sense of security and clarity about what is truth and what is morally right or wrong, because there is a clear and strong authority structure which decides definitively on all such questions, and which they trust absolutely as being of divine origin.

The rise of conservative groups and organizations in the church over the past 40 years and more, which attract significant numbers of adherents, has led to a phenomenon which I find difficult to deal with, viz. an inward looking church, fearful of if not antagonistic towards a secularist world with its concomitant danger of relativism especially in terms of truth and morality -- frequently referred to by pope Benedict XVI; a church which gives an impression of "retreating behind the wagons," and relying on a strong central authority to ensure unity through uniformity in belief and praxis in the face of such dangers. The fear is that without such supervision and control, and that if any freedom in decision-making is allowed, even in less important matters, this will open the door to division and a breakdown in the unity of the church.

This is all about a fundamentally different "vision" *in* the church and "vision" *of* the church. Where today can we find the great theological leaders and thinkers of the past, like Cardinal [Joseph] Frings of Cologne, Germany] and [Bernard Jan ] Alfrink [Utrecht, Netherlands] in Europe, and the great prophetic bishops whose voice and witness was a clarion call to justice, human rights and a global community of equitable sharing -- the witness of Archbishop [Oscar] Romero of El Salvador, the voices of Cardinals [Paulo Evaristo] Arns and [Aloísio Leo Arlindo ] Lorscheider, and Bishops [Dom] Helder Camara and [Pedro] Casadaliga of Brazil? Again, who in today's world "out there" even listens to, much less appreciates and allows themselves to be challenged by the leadership of the church at the present time? I think the moral authority of the church's leadership today has never been weaker. It is, therefore, important in my view that church leadership, instead of giving an impression of its power, privilege and prestige, should rather be experienced as a humble, searching ministry together with its people in order to discern the most appropriate or viable responses which can be made to complex ethical and moral questions -- a leadership, therefore, which does not presume to have all the answers all the time.

But to change focus a bit. One of the truly significant contributions of the church to the building up of a world in which people and communities can live in peace and dignity, with a quality of life which befits those made in God's image, has been the body of what has been called "Catholic Social Teaching", a compendium of which has been released during the past few years. These social teaching principles are: The Common Good, Solidarity, The Option for the Poor, Subsidiarity, The Common Destiny of Goods, The Integrity of Creation, and People-Centeredness -- all based on and flowing out of the values of the Gospel. Here we have very relevant principles and guidelines to engage with complex social, economic, cultural and political realities, especially as these affect the poorest and most vulnerable members of societies everywhere. These principles should enable us, as church, to critique constructively all socio-political-economic systems and policies - and especially from that viewpoint, viz. their effect on the poorest and most vulnerable in society.

However, if church leadership anywhere presumes to criticize or critique socio-political-economic policies and policy makers, or governments, it must also allow itself to be critiqued in the same way in terms of its policies, its internal life, and especially its *modus operandi*. A democratic culture and praxis, with its focus on the participation of citizens and holding accountable those who are elected to govern, is increasingly appreciated in spite of inevitable human shortcomings. When thinking people of all persuasions look at church leadership, they raise questions about, for example, real participation of the membership in its governance and how in fact church leadership is to be held accountable, and to whom. If the church, and its leadership, professes to follow the values of the Gospel and the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, then its internal life, its methods of governing and its use of authority will be scrutinized on the basis of what we profess. Let us take one social teaching principle, vitally important for ensuring participative democracy in the socio-political domain, viz. subsidiarity.

I worked with the [South African] bishops' conference Justice and Peace Department for 17 years. After our political liberation in 1994, we discerned that political liberation in itself would have little relevance to the reality of the poor and marginalized unless it resulted in their economic emancipation. We therefore decided that a fundamental issue for post-1994 South Africa was economic justice. After a great deal of discussion at all levels we issued a Pastoral Statement in 1999, which we entitled "Economic Justice in South Africa". Its primary focus was necessarily on the economy. Among other things, it dealt with each of the Catholic Social Teaching principles, and I give a quotation now from part of its treatment of subsidiarity:

"The principle of subsidiarity protects the rights of individuals and groups in the face of the powerful, especially the state. It holds that those things which can be done or decided at a lower level of society should not be taken over by a higher level. As such, it reaffirms our right and our capacity to decide for ourselves how to organise our relationships and how to enter into agreements with others. ... We can and should take steps to encourage decision-making at lower levels of the economy, and to empower the greatest number of people to participate as fully as possible in economic life." (Economic Justice in South Africa, page 14).

Applied to the church, the principle of subsidiarity requires of its leadership to actively promote and encourage participation, personal responsibility and effective engagement by everyone in terms of their particular calling and ministry in the church and world according to their opportunities and gifts.

However, I think that today we have a leadership in the church which actually undermines the very notion of subsidiarity; where the minutiae of church life and praxis "at the lower level" are subject to examination and authentication being given by the "higher level," in fact the highest level, e.g., the approval of liturgical language and texts; where one of the key Vatican II principles, collegiality in decision-making, is virtually non-existent. The eminent emeritus Archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Franz König, wrote the following in 1999 -- almost 35 years after Vatican II: "In fact, however, *de facto* and not *de jure*, intentionally or unintentionally, the curial authorities working in conjunction with the pope have appropriated the tasks of the episcopal college. It is they who now carry out almost all of them" ("My Vision of the church of the Future", *The Tablet*, March 27, 1999, p. 434).

What compounds this, for me, is the mystique which has in increasing measure surrounded the person of the pope in the last 30 years, such that any hint of critique or questioning of his policies, his way of thinking, his exercise of authority etc. is equated with disloyalty. There is more than a perception, because of this mystique, that unquestioning obedience by the faithful to the pope is required and is a sign of the ethos and fidelity of a true Catholic. When the pope's authority is then intentionally extended to the Vatican curia, there exists a real possibility that unquestioning obedience to very human decisions about a whole range of issues by the curial departments and cardinals also becomes a mark of one's fidelity as a Catholic, and anything less is interpreted as being disloyal to the pope who is charged with steering the bark of Peter.

It has become more and more difficult over the past years, therefore, for the College of Bishops as a whole, or in a particular territory, to exercise their theologically-based servant leadership to discern appropriate responses to their particular socio-economic, cultural, liturgical, spiritual and other pastoral realities and needs; much less to disagree with or seek alternatives to policies and decisions taken in Rome. And what appears to be more and more the policy of appointing "safe", unquestionably orthodox and even very conservative bishops to fill vacant dioceses over the past 30 years, only makes it less and less likely that the College of Bishops -- even in powerful conferences like the United States -- will question what comes out of Rome, and certainly not publicly. Instead, there will be every effort to try and find an accommodation with those in power, which means that the Roman position will prevail in the end. And, taking this further, when an individual bishop takes issue with something, especially in public, the impression or judgment will be that he is "breaking ranks" with the other bishops and will only cause confusion to the lay faithful -- so it is said - because it will appear that the bishops are not united in their teaching and leadership role. The pressure, therefore, to conform.

What we should have, in my view, is a church where the leadership recognizes and empowers decision-making at the appropriate levels in the local church; where local leadership listens to and discerns with the people of God of that area what "the Spirit is saying to the church" and then articulates that as a consensus of the believing, praying, serving community. It needs faith in God and trust in the people of God to take what may seem to some or many as a risk. The church could be enriched as a result through a diversity which truly integrates socio-cultural values and insights into a living and developing faith, together with a discernment of how such diversity can promote unity in the church -- and not, therefore, require uniformity to be truly authentic.

Diversity in living and praxis, as an expression of the principle of subsidiarity, has been taken away from the local churches everywhere by the centralization of decision-making at the level of the Vatican. In addition, orthodoxy is more and more identified with conservative opinions and outlook, with the corresponding judgment that what is perceived to be "liberal" is both suspect and not orthodox, and therefore to be rejected as a danger to the faith of the people.

Is there a way forward? I have grappled with this question especially in the light of the apparent division of aspiration and vision in the church. How do you reconcile such very different visions of church, or models of church? I do not have the answer, except that somewhere we must find an attitude of respect and reverence for difference and diversity as we search for a *living* unity in the church; that people be allowed, indeed enabled, to find or create the type of community which is expressive of their faith and aspirations concerning their Christian and Catholic lives

and engagement in church and world, and which strives to hold in legitimate and constructive tension the uncertainties and ambiguities that all this will bring, trusting in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

At the heart of this is the question of conscience. As Catholics, we need to be trusted enough to make informed decisions about our life, our witness, our expressions of faith, spirituality, prayer, and involvement in the world -- on the basis of a developed conscience. And, as an invitation to an appreciation of conscience and conscientious decisions about life and participation in what is a very human church, I close with the formulation or understanding given by none other than the theologian, Fr. Josef Ratzinger, now pope, when he was a *peritus*, or expert, at Vatican II:

"Over the pope as expression of the binding claim of ecclesiastical authority, there stands one's own conscience which must be obeyed before all else, even if necessary against the requirement of ecclesiastical authority. This emphasis on the individual, whose conscience confronts him with a supreme and ultimate tribunal, and one which in the last resort is beyond the claim of external social groups, even the official church, also establishes a principle in opposition to increasing totalitarianism".

(Joseph Ratzinger in: Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II ,Vol. V., pg. 134 (Ed) H. Vorgrimler, New York, Herder and Herder, 1967).

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