

March 21, 2007 - Catholic theologians wrestle at int'l seminar with bishop's role in local church

By Deborah Gyapong, Canadian Catholic News, on the web page of Catholic Online (CA)

OTTAWA, Canada (CCN) — An international group of theologians and canon lawyers met at St. Paul University Mar. 15-16 to examine how well the vision of Vatican II is being implemented on the local church level.

”The Local Church and Its Leadership: Receiving the vision of Vatican II” was put on by the Peter and Paul Seminar, a worldwide group of interdisciplinary scholars considering the question: “Which institutions in the Roman Catholic Church can be modified and how is this possible so as to foster the unity of the church of Christ and better reflect the faith of the Church?”

St. Paul Theology Professor Kathy Clifford said in an interview the seminar has been meeting since 1998, and this year it focused on “the ministry of the bishop and the structures in the local dioceses in the local church.”

Clifford said the Second Vatican Council put an emphasis on the collegiality of bishops, but saw a new place for the local church and the ministry of the laity. However, she said it left underdeveloped the bishop's role as a leader of the local church. Instead of being seen only as the representative of the pope to the local church, a top-down model, “it also has to be bottom up” so the bishop represents his church to the hierarchy and the pope.

Alexandria-Cornwall Bishop Paul-Andre Durocher, who attended the conference, said in an interview he found it exciting to look at how the episcopal ministry can be seen in terms of “collegiality, collaboration and the empowering of the gifts of many people.”

“What we need to do within the church is create modes of experiencing a mode of collaborative ministry,” he said, noting that can be done by organizing diocesan synods, partnering in collaborative processes and good pastoral councils.

“It also teaches the bishop how to exercise his ministry in a collaborative way,” he said.

Durocher said the difference between the ordained priesthood and the priesthood of all believers is that God chose the ordained ministry to bring about the “full flowering of the baptized.”

“If we keep that in mind we'll be a step forward in the journey that is ours and the struggle that is there,” he said.

Clifford pointed out that the establishment of structures such as diocesan pastoral councils, and diocesan synods where lay people can participate depend on the initiative of the bishops. “There is no requirement to have a regular synod,” she said.

“There's a great deal that's already being done by lay people because of the clergy shortage,” she said. “That experience is also putting so much pressure on all structures of the Church that it's hard to think of new ways.”

University of Erfurt theology professor Myriam Wijlens told the conference some steps have been made in the living out of the Vatican II vision of the hierarchy of the church in the service of the people of God. The noted church's situation has changed in the past 25 years, and church structures have not responded adequately.

“Maybe there was a hope in the sixties and seventies, that the drop of the number of vocations to the priesthood would be only temporarily,” she told the conference. “At the same time it was not foreseen that so many lay persons after the council would feel called to work in and with the church while however remaining lay persons.”

She noted the people of God includes both the laity and the ordained ministry. “Hence in the people of God there cannot or should not be a struggle for power between hierarchy and faithful, because all the faithful should be oriented towards Christ.”

University of Tilburg theology professor Henk Witte noted how a problem arises when a lay pastoral worker is equated with a social worker and how dioceses are operating now with two models of work relationships: a theological model for ordained ministry and a secular workplace model for lay workers.

A secular workplace model is also affecting relationships between priests and their bishops as a result of the sexual abuse scandals around the world. Eugene Duffy, Western Theological Institute in Galway, Ireland, theology professor, said various law suits and court cases have opened up confidential files to civil authorities, creating fear among priests who might be vulnerable to false accusations. “The traditional relationships of trust and confidence have been broken down,” he said, noting that some priests have come to “distrust the ability of bishops to lead their way out of the crisis.”

He said some dioceses may be too large for the bishop to maintain the close relationships he needs with his priests. “Only in an atmosphere of openness and trust can accountability exist.”

The conference also looked at ecumenism and how the various structures of the church and theological understandings of the role of the bishop and priest can help or hinder dialogue with other faiths. A segment of the conference was devoted to leadership and synodality in the Orthodox Churches.