

Where does the buck stop in the Church?



Clarity on ultimate responsibility and liability must be established

You could be forgiven for not knowing where the buck stops in the Catholic Church these days. In any society, organization or Church community, it is important to know who is ultimately responsible in decision making; otherwise, chaos or worse would prevail.

In an unprecedented (for a cardinal) cross examination in court last week, Cardinal George Pell of Sydney seemed confused about responsibility in the Sydney Church. He was speaking for the Archdiocese of Sydney which he led from 2001 until his transfer to a job at the Vatican, appearing before the Royal Commission into child sex abuse in institutions, including the Church's, across Australia.

The Cardinal blamed various mistakes on his hand-picked lieutenants, "couldn't recall" the details of instructions being given on his behalf to his lawyers and claimed his legal representatives had gone beyond what was acceptable to any Christian in defending a case brought against the archdiocese by a child abuse victim, John Ellis.

The same was true at a global level in February when the Vatican's chief spokesman, Father Federico Lombardi, ducked criticism from the United Nations committee investigating the Church's compliance with a UN protocol it signed on the rights of children.

No, the Vatican wasn't responsible for the oversight of the Church's 'best practice' in child protection. It was only responsible for the 32 children of employees in the Vatican City State. Accountability for

the Church doesn't reside in Rome.

Cardinal Pell's confusions and the Vatican's dodges with the UN notwithstanding, accountability for the Church throughout the world has always belonged with Rome – despite attempted reforms at Vatican II. It is from Rome that the authority devolves to any bishop in the rest of the Catholic world. Every bishop on ordination makes a personal oath of loyalty to the Pope.

That reality has intensified in the last 30 years, disempowering local bishops who have become branch managers of a multinational enterprise, charged with repeating whatever the line from HQ happens to be.

And it has neutralized dioceses and groups of dioceses in bishops' conferences from assuming the authority and responsibility called for in Vatican II.

Perhaps the confusion at the Vatican reflects something – this way of organizing things doesn't work. The chaos that such a 'command and control' system of administration for a multinational community stretching across all the continents of the world and their diverse cultures reached the high point of its dysfunction with Benedict XVI.

The well documented chaos and mismanagement of that period underlines something well known outside the Church: Imperial government is unsustainable and has been for a century.

But the efforts of Rome to control all Catholic activities from headquarters, particularly while Joseph Ratzinger was cardinal prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith and as reiterated by the current prefect, Cardinal Mueller, extended to the neutralizing of regional groups of bishops conferences.

In Asia as in the Americas – North and South – that meant that continental aggregations of bishops' conferences were told that their groups had no doctrinal footing and therefore little significance for anything but convening occasional topical meetings.

The situation appears to be changing with the emphasis of Pope Francis on decentralization, consultation and synods. He wants participation, consultation, devolution and decentralization. As well, what the pope wants of bishops – or any pastor in the Church – points to deep cultural change as well: shepherds who have the smell of the sheep they tend to, who know and feel with their people rather than look over their shoulders to Rome.

But the desire for inclusiveness and participation runs into a very thick brick wall. At the moment, on most important matters, the pope takes full responsibility. The overwhelming power of the pope reached its high point in Vatican I's 1870 definition of papal infallibility.

Not only did the council decree that the pope would be “free from error” in defining faith and morals. It also held that the pope had “primacy and immediacy of jurisdiction” in the Church.

The universal jurisdiction of the pope not only doesn't work, as displayed especially in the confused mismanagement of Benedict XVI's time as pontiff. It also represents a major obstacle to promoting Church unity.

Both Paul VI and Blessed John Paul admitted that the biggest obstacle to building Church unity was in fact the pope.

Reform of his office is what Blessed John Paul sought in his 1995 encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*. While some responses followed, there was little substantial reaction.

The main sticking point for Orthodox Christians in their dealings with the papacy is their rejection of an overriding submission to the Bishop of Rome, not so much in doctrinal areas about which they mostly agree with the Romans.

It is more Rome's presumption of moral and disciplinary authority and the differing cultures and histories of theological emphasis that divide the Romans and the Orthodox.

This is a disciplinary requirement to which the Orthodox will never submit. Having ultimate responsibility remain with the Vatican doesn't work for the good governance for a Church that stretches worldwide. And it actually works against something every Christian should know was Jesus Christ's hope – unity among his followers.

The Holy See hires and fires bishops and sets the general terms for the operations of the Catholic Church through various instruments – papal directives, administrative decrees for dioceses and religious congregations, and the code of Canon Law.

The Vatican and the pope can't have it both ways. It either has the authority that carries responsibility and liability or it doesn't. At the moment, by its own rules, it does; and that isn't working. In fact it works against one of the main emphases of the post Vatican II Church. If it wants to change that and delegate authority and responsibility, it will need to revise Vatican I's decree.

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