

Church leadership is not about control



In a homily to celebrate 25th anniversary of Bishop William Kenney's ordination Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP says a bishop's rule is about opening space for God

Bishop William, I feel enormously honoured to be asked to preach at your twenty fifth anniversary of ordination as a bishop. You asked me to preach on what it means to be a good bishop. I confessed to one of my brethren that I was a little nervous about this since I had never been a bishop. He replied: 'Don't worry Timothy. Ignorance has never stopped you before.'

But I would like to thank you on behalf of the community of Blackfriars for being a good bishop for us. We are all deeply appreciative of your pastoral and loving care. In the gospel, Jesus prays: 'that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one.' The bishop is someone who should gather us into unity, practising what Paul calls the 'ministry of reconciliation'. This is a healing ministry, overcoming division in society and in the Church, in the parishes and the diocese, and within the Universal Church. But it is not any sort of unity. It is living the unity of the Triune God, 'that they may be one even as we are one'.

It took the Church centuries to grasp that this is a love of complete equality, of Father, Son and Holy

Spirit. We are baptised into an equal love. Though I think of an Irish Dominican, Cardinal Michael Browne, who returned home after years in Rome. He went to see the nun who had baptised him as a baby in emergency, to thank her. She was now very ancient and said, 'Your Eminence, it was honour to baptise you ... in the name of Jesus, Mary and Joseph.' For a moment of panic he wondered if he had been baptised at all, and then reflected that perhaps her mind had wandered a little.

The Father shares with the Son and the Spirit, everything, even complete divinity. And so the bishop is charged with building a unity that undoes inequality, which strengthens the weak, which purifies the community of domination and subjugation. Of course the Church has been from the beginning a hierarchy, otherwise she would just be a motley collection of disconnected individuals and not the Body of Christ. But it is a paradoxical sort of hierarchy, because if it is of God, then it must always be, as it were, undoing itself, subverting inequality. It does not always look like that. A former bishop of Limerick is supposed to have said: 'Everyone in this diocese is equal, from me downwards!' Bishops are ordained to govern. Obviously this involves a lot of administration, letter writing, meetings, taking of difficult decisions. But Christian government is always at the service of the rule of God, not the rule of the bishop. Charles Taylor, the Canadian historian of ideas, has plotted the rise of the culture of control.

After the sixteenth century, there was a loss of confidence in the rule of God's gentle providence, and so increasingly there was an impulse for us to manage everything. We see the emergence of absolute monarchs, centralised state control. Everything must be administered, monitored, controlled, culminating in all the absurdity of endless health and safety regulations. In this culture of control, the Church should be an oasis of freedom, for we believe in God's rule. But Cardinal George of Chicago complained recently that the Church 'is not a Christ-centred church, as it is supposed to be; it is a bishop-centred church' (National Catholic Reporter October 7 2009, Quoted Michael Crosby p.83)

But the bishop's rule, I believe, is about always opening the space for God's rule. This includes making sure that no one else rules: the bullies must not rule, the fearful must not be allowed to control things. The latest fashion cannot manipulate us; nor the media, nor people who threaten to report you to Rome. God's rule works through the Holy Spirit which is poured into every member of the Body of Christ. So the bishop's government, I would think, is about helping the timid to speak up, the minority to have their word, the despised to be heard with respect and especially those who disagree with you. So the bishop's government is not about control, but opening the space for God's surprising grace. Jesus says in today's gospel: 'Sanctify them in truth.' Cardinal Suhard of Paris famously said that the first task of a priest is to speak the truth. There is no healthy unity except in the truth. The trouble is that when one starts to speak the truth, one is likely to stir up controversy, provoke division, and your desk will be deep in angry letters.

The greatest challenge for Church leadership today is to how to speak truthfully and preserve unity. If you take a strong stand on a moral issue, then the media will fall upon you, and if you question what

the Church has so far taught, and explore some new development, then you will stir up a storm. How can you both speak the truth and keep unity? How can we be one without being fuzzy? This requires of us a deep confidence in the great teachings of our faith. But also a vast humility in the face of the mystery of God's love, which is always beyond our grasp. We are a teaching Church, entrusted with the great doctrines of the Creed, the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. We must dare to teach these with confidence, otherwise our religion will just become tedious moralisation. But we must also be humble in the face of God's mystery, beggars after the truth, eager for what anyone can teach us, regardless of whether they are Christian or not. We should be attuned to the creative thinkers, the novelists and filmmakers, the poets and song writers, the wise men and women, for what they can teach us. St Dominic wanted us preachers to be beggars, not just for bread but beggars for the truth, which is why he sent the first friars off to the best universities to learn. Anyone who has insight into the heights and depths of love, regardless of whether they are Christians or not, has something to teach us. If we give them authority, then we shall have authority. Bishop Butler, who ordained me, said at the Vatican Council in his perfect Ciceronian Latin: 'Ne timeamus quod veritas veritati noceat'; 'Let us not fear that truth can endanger truth'.

All truth is of the Holy Spirit. So faced with the strange mixture of wisdom and stupidity of our contemporary society, let us not be defensive and afraid. If we are, we shall just become an embattled little sect. Let us gather in the wisdom of even the most unlikely people. Then we shall gather people into the unity of God's love, which has a place for everyone. And then, Jesus assures us, 'the world will know that thou has sent me, and has loved them, even as thou has loved me'.

Father Timothy Radcliffe OP was speaking at the Cathedral of St Chad in Birmingham on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ordination of Bishop William Kenney

Timothy Radcliffe OP - Tha Tablet