

## Summary Paper No.3

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### Co-responsibility: sharing in church governance

People's enthusiasm for doing things better is often disturbing to those who govern. One such matter, proposed by Vatican II, is the need for 'co-responsibility' in church governance.

Co-responsibility highlights the baptismal rights and responsibilities of every member of Christ's faithful and emphasises their equality in the Body of Christ. Baptism gives everyone a share in the priestly, prophetic and kingly ministries of Christ, calls them to holiness, and confers true equality for the building up of the Body of Christ.

Co-responsible Christians gladly accept their responsibility to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God and invite others to become disciples of Jesus Christ through the witness of their lives, especially by compassionately reaching out to the poor and marginalised.

Baptism also gives all Christ's faithful a right to the 'spiritual goods'<sup>i</sup> of the Church – Mass, Word and Sacraments - and co-responsibility for building up the Body of Christ.

There is a distinction between the ordained pastors and the lay (non-ordained) members of Christ's faithful; but there is a unifying purpose. Both are bound to each other by mutual need: pastors must minister to all, and lay members should co-operate with pastors. Together, in their entirety, they bear witness to the unity of the Body of Christ (*LG*, 32); together, in their co-operation, they build up the Body of Christ.

The call for co-responsibility has disturbed many pastors, for it demands a conversion of mind and a transformation of outlook (*metanoia*).

In 2009 Benedict XVI said that Vatican II's vision for pastors and laity being co-responsible for mission and ministry was still unfulfilled:

Too many of the baptised do not feel part of the ecclesial community and live on its margins. Pastoral structures must be improved so that the co-responsibility of all the members of the People of God in their entirety is promoted. This demands a change in mindset, particularly concerning lay people. They must no longer be viewed as ‘collaborators’ of the clergy, but truly recognized as ‘co-responsible’ for the Church’s being and action.

Canon law is ambiguous here. In one place it says that “only clerics can obtain offices for whose exercise the power of orders (or the power of ecclesiastical governance) is required” (c. 274); but in another, that while “those in sacred orders are qualified, according to the law, for the power of governance, lay members of Christ’s faithful can ‘co-operate’ in the exercise of this same power [of governance]”, according to the law (c. 129).

In practice, there have been some changes despite canonical restrictions; lay persons can hold a range of ecclesiastical offices, including diocesan chancellor, finance administrator, and even judge. Similarly, diocesan and parish financial councils must have lay members, diocesan and parish pastoral councils must have a majority of lay members, bishops can entrust the exercise of pastoral care in parishes to lay persons with authority to preach, baptise, distribute Holy Communion, bring Viaticum, and conduct funeral services.; and lay women and men can be called to participate in diocesan synods and plenary councils with a consultative vote.

The lay faithful also have a right to tell their pastors of their personal needs and desires, as well as express their views on things that concern the good of the Church. Pastors, for their part, must recognize and promote the responsibility of the lay faithful, make use of their advice, assign them roles, give them room and freedom for action, and encourage them to take on tasks on their own initiative (*LG*, 37).

Yet, in Australian dioceses and elsewhere in the world, much of this has not been actioned. Few bishops in Australia have established pastoral councils and even fewer have held diocesan synods, thus depriving the lay faithful from having a co-responsible share in church governance.

For effective co-responsibility, ongoing dialogue between pastors and laity is paramount. It will strengthen the responsibility of the laity, renew their enthusiasm, and ensure that pastors will reach more informed and better decisions on both spiritual and temporal matters. Through mutual support, the whole Church can more effectively fulfil its mission for the life of the world ( *LG*, 37-38).

Pope Francis expects bishops to foster “a dynamic, open and missionary communion” and “encourage and develop the means of participation – including diocesan and parish pastoral councils and diocesan synods – and other forms of pastoral dialogue, out of a desire to listen to everyone”, and with “the missionary aspiration of reaching everyone” (*EG*, 31). Sharing in church governance is the essence of co-responsibility, a truly Christian practice.

## References:

*LG – Lumen Gentium*, cf. Chapter IV

*EG - Evangelii Gaudium*, cf. paras 31-33

Archbishop Prowse: <https://cgcatholic.org.au/2018/05/mission-of-dialogue-and-co-responsibility/> and <https://cgcatholic.org.au/catholic-voice/blog/co-responsibility-a-baptismal-commitment/>

Benedict XVI: <http://www.uncnewman.org/good-of-the-community/2017/9/14/about-co-responsibility>

Canadian Bishops Conference: [http://www.cccb.ca/site/images/stories/pdf/CCCB\\_Co-responsibility\\_EN-web.pdf](http://www.cccb.ca/site/images/stories/pdf/CCCB_Co-responsibility_EN-web.pdf) NOTE: this is an excellent presentation and has a good section on ‘clericalisation’ of the laity.

Synod of Bishops, XVth General Assembly on Youth, Final document: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20181027\\_doc-final-instrumentum-xvassemblea-giovani\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20181027_doc-final-instrumentum-xvassemblea-giovani_en.html) NOTE: Part III contains extensive material on ‘co-responsibility’, ‘collaboration’ and ‘synodality’.