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Regional Councils

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Abstract: The author pleads for the revival of Regional councils which are one of the most important factors in the growth and vitality of the Church during the first millennium. Flexibility and adaptation to the circumstances could doubtless be found in regional councils. Regions are coming to be seen as increasingly important in our global society. While people want to be part of the whole human family, they also seek smaller units of which the region is coming increasingly to be appreciated. For Christians, therefore, regional councils seem well suited to our new millennium.

Keywords: Regional Council, Future of the Church, Canon law, Church history.

Having spent two decades on ecumenical councils, I am glad of this opportunity to focus on regional councils.[1] They may seem lower-level councils of little authority and therefore small beer in the theme of this Conference, 'Authority and Governance in the Church'. Such an attitude, however, reveals a modern misunderstanding about the nature of authority in the Church, partly an unintended result of Vatican I's proclamation of papal infallibility and over-emphasis upon papal teaching. That is to say, there has grown up in the last century and a half a dangerous dichotomy between the teaching of ecumenical councils and the papacy on the one hand and all other teaching on the other: the former touches on papal infallibility and therefore is to be exalted whereas the latter is not and so can be dismissed as of little consequence.

Regional councils were, in reality, one of the most important factors in the growth and vitality of the Church during the first millennium. There was then much less of a dichotomy be-

tween them and, on the other hand, ecumenical councils and other institutions of church government: they went hand in hand with each other, each was dependent upon and understandable in terms of the other. In the Middle Ages, in the West, following the sad schism between the eastern and western churches, beginning in the second half of the eleventh century, regional councils continued to play a role, though one of less importance than in the early Church: a dichotomy between the papacy and other authorities began to emerge. After the council of Trent (1545-63), regional councils were definitely in decline. They lost their initiative, their legitimate role came to be largely confined to executing the decisions of higher authorities, whether they be ecumenical councils or decisions of the papacy. This demise of regional councils, and the culture of dialogue they embodied, has been one of the greatest blows in the history of the Church, a principal reason why the Church has found it so difficult to remain up-to-date.

These are sweeping statements, how do the facts support them?

Early Church

The classic collection of conciliar material, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, edited by Giovanni and his successors, reveals the remarkable number of regional councils during the Church's history, especially in the early centuries: fifty-three volumes in the final version of this monumental work, each averaging more than 600 folio-size pages, take the councils down to 1870.[2] The ecumenical councils are well covered yet the majority of pages are devoted to regional councils. The more recent editions of regional councils in the fourth to seventh centuries in Africa (i.e., the Roman province of Africa, in the Latin-speaking western half of north Africa) and Gaul (i.e., principally modern France but including some neighbouring areas in modern Switzerland, Germany and Belgium), edited by C. Munier and C. de Clerq, in the Corpus Christianorum series, focus more closely upon these two regions.[3] For Carthage alone records survive of eighteen regional councils between 393 and 419. For many of

these councils we know little more than that they took place. Clearly our knowledge, both in terms of the number of councils held and the topics treated, is only the tip of the iceberg of what was in fact going on. It should be remembered, moreover, that the total Christian population in the early church was only a fraction of what it is today — at most a hundred million in comparison with over a billion today - which makes the number and quality of the councils at that time all the more remarkable. Undoubtedly regional councils were at the centre of church order in a way they cannot be considered to be today, at least in the Roman Catholic church.

The strongest statement of the importance of regional councils in the early Church comes from canon 5 of the first council of Nicaea I in 325. The canon treats of excommunication and it ends with regulations regarding the rights of those excommunicated to appeal to a provincial council against their sentence.

> Concerning those, whether of the clergy or of the laity, who have been excommunicated, the sentence is to be respected by the bishops of each province, according to the canon which forbids those expelled by some to be admitted by others. But let an inquiry be held to ascertain whether anyone has been expelled from the community because of pettiness or quarrelsomeness or any such ill nature on the part of the bishop. Accordingly, in order that there may be proper opportunity for inquiry into the matter, it is agreed that it would be well for synods to be held each year in each province twice a year, so that these inquiries may be conducted by all the bishops of the province assembled together, and in this way by general consent those who have offended against their own bishop may be recognised by all to be reasonably excommunicated, until all the bishops in common may decide to pronounce a more lenient sentence on these persons. The synods shall be held at the following times: one before Lent, so that, all pettiness being set aside, the gift offered to God may be unblemished; the second after the season of autumn.[4]

The purpose of the council, according to the canon, was disciplinary: to provide a mechanism for deciding about excommunications. Discipline, or church order, remained a fundamental role of regional councils in the early Church but they were not afraid of discussing the great theological issues of the day. One might say, to generalize, that whereas decisions about

doctrine were the principal concern of the ecumenical councils of the Church's first millennium and those about church order were important but secondary, for the regional councils, taken as a whole, the order was reversed; though in a fair number of the latter, especially when doctrinal controversies were particularly acute, theological issues predominated. Often, as one would expect, doctrinal and disciplinary issues were interlinked and cannot be separated out.

The importance of councils in the life and government of the Church was stated most eloquently by the second council of Constantinople in 553. In this case, too, it is an ecumenical council that is speaking and in the first place it refers to ecumenical councils but the passage goes on to a more general recommendation of discussion at all levels in the Church.

> 'The holy fathers, who have gathered at intervals in the four holy councils [i.e., the first four ecumenical councils, Nicaea I, Constantinople I, Ephesus and Chalcedon] have followed the examples of antiquity. They dealt with heresies and current problems by debate in common, since it was established as certain that when the disputed question is set out by each side in communal discussions, the light of truth drives out the shadows of lying.
>
> The truth cannot be made clear in any other way when there are debates about questions of faith, since everyone requires the assistance of his neighbour. As Solomon says in his proverbs: "A brother who helps a brother shall be exalted like a strong city; he shall be as strong as a well established kingdom" [Proverbs 18,19]. Again in Ecclesiastes he says: "Two are better than one, for they have a good reward for their toil" [Ecclesiastes 4,9]. And the Lord himself says: "Amen I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" [Matthew 18,19].' [5]

What was the influence of the regional councils in the early Church? This is a difficult question to answer and we must beware of imposing modern notions of direct influence: diocesan, provincial or other regional councils influencing ecumenical ones as if there was a direct chain of command. Of course there was influence of one council upon another. We may think of the influence of Antioch and other regional councils in 324 and early

325 upon the first (ecumenical) council of Nicaea later in the year 325; of Sardica (c.343) upon the successful reception of Nicaea; of Rome (680) upon the diothelite teaching of Constantinople III (680-1). Or the negative influence, in the sense that it produced a reaction, of Sirmium (357) and its 'Blasphemy', or the 'Robber' council of Ephesus in 449 which led to the reaction of Chalcedon, or the iconoclasm of Hieria (757) which was countered by the iconophile decisions of Nicaea II (787). But we must beware of a false teleological view of church history that, looking back from where the Church is today, sees the development that has occurred as inevitable and, as a result, wants to find the links in this chain of development. The actual situation was far more fluid, the end result less inevitable, at least in human terms. Another point is that it was not until the council of Chalcedon in 451 that the list of ecumenical councils came to be fixed. Beforehand, and for many communities long after, it was not clear which councils should be considered ecumenical: as a result the distinction between them and regional councils, including the difference in their respective authorities, was far from clear.

Keeping the Church Abreast and Ahead of Its Time

More important than looking for the precise influence of one council upon another, or upon the Church more generally, is the fact that councils were being held frequently and in many places. There was a general atmosphere of debate: councils, regional and other, provided a forum for views to be expressed and heard. The comments of Gregory of Nyssa regarding popular debate about the Trinity are well known. 'If in this city [of Constantinople],' he said, with the continuing Arian controversy in mind, ' you ask anyone to change money, he will first discuss with you whether the Son of God is begotten or unbegotten: if you ask about the quality of bread, you will receive the answer that the Father is greater than the Son; if you suggest you require a bath, you will be told that there was nothing before the Son was created!'[6] Gregory was speaking in the aftermath of an ecumenical council, Constantinople I in 381, yet his comments might well apply to the ambience surrounding regional councils of the time.

Regional councils helped to keep the early Church up to date, indeed ahead of its time. We can see this in terms both of church order and government and of doctrine. In all sorts of ways the early Church was ahead of its time in the social and political orders. For example, it accorded more rights to women than did secular society: slaves, too, were offered more hope and opportunity within the Church than in society at large. We need more studies on the role of women and slaves in councils. We know that women presided at two ecumenical councils – the empresses Pulcheria at Chalcedon in 451 and Irene at Nicaea II in 787 – and it would be good to know more about their role, and that of slaves, both direct and indirect, at regional and other local councils. Councils enabled the Church to be more democratic and representative than secular society. Of course one must beware of being over-optimistic in this respect. Bishops were the core members of regional councils, in this sense they were quite hierarchical: though more research needs to be done regarding their composition. Some families or individuals dominated the councils of a region just as they dominated its main see. We may think of the power of Paul of Samosata, bishop of Antioch, until he was deposed by the regional council held in that city in 268; or various families who held sway over the see of Alexandria and hence over the councils in that region. Even so, councils may have meant that Christians sensed their voices were heard and their concerns met more than most people felt in society at large.

Today, on the contrary, the Church is in danger of falling into the pernicious trap of exaggerated counter-culturalism. While in the first millennium the Church accepted what was best in the forms of secular government and then went beyond them, now many in the Church are placing excessive emphasis on the government of the Church being different from that of secular society – that it has its own hierarchical forms of government that have nothing to do with secular democracy – and on the need for the Church to be counter-cultural. Earlier the Church had less fear of other institutions: it was readier to adopt for itself the good elements in them, to use and then to improve upon them, to give

a lead in society rather than to follow reluctantly or to distance itself unnecessarily. We saw a revival of this leadership in government, on the part of the Church, at the time of Vatican II, but the momentum does not seem to have been maintained. The councils of the past, including regional councils, open our eyes to hopeful possibilities for the future.

An eye for the future appears in the teaching of the early councils as well as in their institutional forms. They produced creeds and other doctrinal statements that endured for many centuries, indeed unto the present day. They were able to find words and expressions that not only brought the Church abreast of its time but somehow successfully foresaw developments in the future. How can this remarkable achievement be explained? Two factors seem to be decisive. First, the frequency and regularity of councils. They formed a continuous, ongoing process in which regional councils were essential. Above them, so to speak, were the ecumenical councils and it is their statements that we chiefly remember, but these can only be understood within the framework of many regional and local councils, as mentioned earlier. Secondly, the principal of unanimity. Councils were not like Congress or the Senate in this country, or Parliament in my own country, or most other national assemblies, where a majority of one is sufficient to pass a law. For the councils of the Church, unanimity, or virtual unanimity, has always been sought, so that their decrees are the result of consensus rather than a majority verdict. As such they reflect the collective thought and experience of many individuals, both those who attended the councils in question and many others who were directly or indirectly involved in their preparation. They show the collective thought of the Church, local or universal, and so are more likely to be prescient towards the future than are the ideas of one or a few individuals; however necessary individual initiatives may be on occasion.

Middle Ages and Later

When we turn to the Middle Ages, at least in the West, we find a much more 'from above' approach to councils. Two factors

seem to be decisive. First, the absence of the conciliar tradition of the eastern church. The councils of the early Church were held predominantly in the East and it was there that the conciliar tradition principally developed. The loss of the eastern influence, as a result of the schism between the eastern and western churches, meant a loss of this more democratic approach. Secondly, and accompanying this development, was the Gregorian Reform movement. Also beginning in the second half of the eleventh century and deriving its name from its most important figure, pope Gregory VII (1073-85), the movement exalted papal authority, initially in order to bring about reforms within the western church, and as a result there was increased emphasis upon papal authority over councils. The point is seen most clearly in the general or ecumenical councils of the western church of the period, Lateran I in 1123 to Lateran V in 1512-17. Apart from three of them towards the end — Vienne (1311-12) which saw tension between pope Clement V and the king of France, Philip IV, and the councils of Constance (1414-18) and Basel (1431-49), which clashed with the popes of the time — these councils have been described as 'papal councils'. That is to say, the council's decrees were largely prepared beforehand by the pope and his curia and the role of the council was little more than to approve, or rubber-stamp, this prepared legislation; there was relatively little discussion or making of the decrees by the council.

This 'from above' approach then impacted upon regional councils. Their role changed, to oversimplify, from initiating discussion and action to implementing or communicating the decisions of higher authorities: either the ecumenical (or general) councils or the papacy. The new role is well illustrated by those of the English church in this period, most notably the numerous regional councils - diocesan, provincial and national - that were held in the thirteenth century to implement the decrees of the fourth Lateran council of 1215.[7] Regional councils in the aftermath of the council of Trent (1545-63) were dominated by the implementation of this great council. Those held by Charles Borromeo in his huge archdiocese of Milan in the late sixteenth century are

obvious examples. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were regional councils of more independence, especially in France and the German-speaking lands, but they came to be associated with schism: Gallicanism in France, Febronianism in Germany. The whole conciliar programme gradually fell under a cloud of suspicion. Hostility to general or ecumenical councils, on the grounds that they might lead to a revival of the claims made in the fifteenth century by the councils of Constance and Basel to superiority over the papacy, filtered down to a suspicion of all councils as possible rivals to papal authority. Fear of the conciliar ghost remains with us today in many quarters of the Roman Catholic church. The restriction to an advisory role, and to a tightly controlled agenda, of the recently established biennial synods of bishops is one example of this fear; hostility to initiative on the part of episcopal conferences is another.

Regional Councils and the Future

The demise of regional councils represents one of the gravest wounds in the history of the Church. The lack of these and similar forums for discussion is an obvious reason why the Church has failed to keep abreast of the times or to give a more credible lead. It may also be seen as a major reason why Christianity has made little impact on the other major world religions of Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam as well as upon the rationalism of the Enlightenment and upon modern and post-modern secularism. Christianity's success has been largely, in terms of conversions, with peoples of more primitive beliefs and religions. Its relative failure with more sophisticated belief-systems is striking and surely due in part to the absence of proper structures for debate among Christians. Regional councils were a resource of the early Church, a treasure that would be highly relevant today and probably greatly prized by any successful business organisation or government, yet it has largely been thrown away. The Church now appears constantly on the defensive in the face of modern civilization and its challenges. It prospers in time of persecution or in a minority situation, yet as soon as some prosperity or a new

situation arrives it seems incapable of coping in a positive way. The brilliance of the Christian message is dimmed by the inability to adopt appropriate structures for its assimilation and proclamation: in marked contrast to the early Church when, in part thanks to regional councils, the Christian community grew in size and even more remarkably in depth of understanding.

In the desire to update the Church, much attention has recently been given to reform of the papacy and the possibility of another ecumenical council. Pope John Paul II invited ideas about reform of the papacy in his encyclical *Ut unum sint* and Archbishop Quinn, present here at this conference, has provided perhaps the most acclaimed response to the pope's invitation in his book.[8] Cardinal Martini of Milan, and others, have indicated the desirability of another ecumenical council. Too much hope, in my opinion, should not be put upon reform of the papacy and the Roman curia. It is notoriously difficult for any institution to reform itself, so that waiting for such reform may be waiting too long. Ecumenical councils, at least the more successful ones, seem to come unexpectedly. Few expected Vatican II, even fewer foresaw its remarkable success: the Holy Spirit blows where She wills. My own feeling is that Vatican II has not yet been properly digested and another ecumenical council soon might be more divisive than helpful. Regional councils, on the other hand, present a surer and more predictable basis. That they take place regularly is more important than precisely what they discuss and decide: they are deeply rooted in the Church's tradition and therefore of impeccable orthodoxy. They can be revived and promoted without awkward questions about their legitimacy.

Regional councils, moreover, are important for the Roman Catholic church's ecumenical progress with other christian churches. All the other mainstream churches accept some form of conciliar government and criticize the Catholic church, explicitly or implicitly, for having largely abandoned it in favour of more hierarchical institutions. As a result, the only forms of government that are likely to be acceptable to these other traditions,

in a united Church, are those with a conciliar basis. Emphasis is often laid upon the need to call a new ecumenical council at which all the churches will be represented. Maybe this is right but ecumenical councils are usually 'one off' occasions and waiting for the next one may be waiting too long. Regional councils are a sounder and more realistic possibility. They can be promoted, as mentioned, as being fully in conformity with the early tradition of the Catholic church and in accord with the practices of other christian churches, as institutions that can readily take root again without the need to wait upon the unpredictability of an ecumenical council and without engaging in the negativity that criticism of the papacy often entails.

Conclusion

You may feel that this paper ought to have begun with a definition of regional councils and that it has failed to provide one throughout. The conference has papers scheduled on ecumenical councils, plenary councils and episcopal conferences. Where do regional councils fit in? I may say, in defence, that the 1983 Code of Canon Law, as well as the index of the Canon Law Society of America's *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, provide entries on ecumenical, episcopal and finance councils, parish pastoral councils, plenary, presbyteral, provincial and religious councils, but none on regional councils! There seems to be no clear definition of a regional council and that may be good. It lies somewhere between an ecumenical and a diocesan council, but precisely where may be best left vague. There was never any attempt in the early or medieval church, or even later, so far as I am aware, to define precisely the status of a regional council in the way that it was for ecumenical, provincial and diocesan councils.

'Council' comes from the Latin *concilium*, to 'call together.' 'Synod', the parallel word, from the Greek óývoäoò, is more evocative, deriving from the two words óýv, 'together', and ôäüò, 'way' or 'journey': people making a journey together, a beautiful image of the pilgrim church. There is nothing mysterious about a church council, basically it is just this, Christians coming together to discuss mat-

ters important to them. They offer many possibilities and great flexibility. Of the first seven ecumenical councils, women presided at two of them, as mentioned earlier: all of them were summoned, presided over, directly or indirectly through their officials, and their decrees promulgated, by laypeople, namely the eastern emperors of the day and the two empresses. Indeed at the first and arguably most important of all of them, Nicaea I in 325, the emperor Constantine was not even a Christian inasmuch as he had not yet been baptised. Thus we see the Holy Spirit working outside the Church. All of them, moreover, were held in the East, in modern Turkey. Similar flexibility and adaptation to the circumstances could doubtless be found in regional councils. So we look at them today not as museum pieces of only historical interest, nor as institutions that can be reproduced again in precisely their former shapes. Rather they offer possibilities of adaptation and creativity, just as they were adaptable and creative in their own day. Regions, moreover, are coming to be seen as increasingly important in our global society. While people want to be part of the whole human family, they also seek smaller units of which the region – be it a region within a country, or a whole country, or a group of countries – is coming increasingly to be appreciated. For Christians, therefore, regional councils seem well suited to our new millennium.

Notes and References

1. Until recent times the words 'council' and 'synod' were synonymous. In the late 1960s Pope Paul VI, following the promptings of the second Vatican council, introduced into the Roman Catholic Church biennial synods of bishops, whose purpose was to advise the pope on various issues. Thus there emerged, in the RC Church, a distinction between synods, whose role is advisory or consultative, and councils, such as Vatican II, which have legislative and executive power. Since 'council' is more common in English, it is the word normally used in this essay, except in quotations or elsewhere when "synod" is clearly indicated. For 'regional' see the comments in the Conclusion.
2. G.D. Mansi and others (eds.), *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, 53 vols. (Florence, Venice, Paris, Leipzig, 1759-1927). Reprinted in Graz, Akademische Druck- und Verlaganstalt, 1960-2, with an index volume.

3. C. Munier (ed.), *Concilia Galliae A.314-A.506*, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, cxlviii (Turnholt: Brepols, 1963); Clerq, C. de (ed.), *Concilia Galliae A.511-A.695*, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, cxlviii A (Turnholt: Brepols, 1963); C. Munier (ed.), *Concilia Äfricae A.345-A.525*, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, cxlix (Turnholt: Brepols, 1974).
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5. N. Tanner (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, p. 108.
6. J.P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Graeca* (Paris, 1844-64), xlvi, col. 557.
7. D. Whitelock, M. Brett and C.N.L. Brooke (eds.), *Councils & Synods, With Other Documents Relating to the English Church, I: A.D. 871-1204*, 2 Parts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981); F.W. Powicke and C.R. Cheney, *Councils & Synods, With Other Documents Relating to the English Church, II: A.D. 1204-1313*, 2 Parts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964). The late medieval councils still await publication in this series and meanwhile are best found in D. Wilkins (ed.), *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae, A.D. 446-1718* (London, 1737), vols. 2 and 3. For the implementation of Lateran IV by the English councils, see M. Gibbs and J. Lang, *Bishops and Reform, 1215-1272, with special reference to the Lateran Council of 1215* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934).
8. Quinn, *The Reform of the Papacy*, New York: Crossroad, 1999.

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