Catholic UPDATE

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HOW THE SPIRIT GUIDES THE CHURCH

TWO VIEWS IN MATTHEW AND JOHN

by William H. Shannon

Recent studies of the Bible and New Testament times have added much to our understanding of the Church. One of the significant insights is the realization that each of the Gospels has its own distinctive character and intent. If one compares the Gospel of Matthew with that of John, it quickly becomes clear that Matthew is the most ecclesiastical ("Church-oriented") of the Gospels and John the least.

In fact, the word *church* appears only twice in the Gospels, both times in Matthew. Thus, there is the well-known passage, in Chapter 16, about Peter as the Rock on which the Church will be built; and in Chapter 18 the description of the procedure for correcting an erring brother or sister. Three steps are outlined: First, you speak to the erring person one-on-one; if that doesn't work, you go with two or three others; finally, if the erring one still remains obstinate, you refer the matter to the Church. Reading Matthew, one soon becomes aware that the Church of Matthew was a structured, hierarchical community with authority quite clearly defined.

John's community of love

Moving from Matthew to John, you find yourself entering a completely different ecclesial world. *The community of the Fourth Gospel seems to have strongly emphasized equality among its members.* No hierarchy is mentioned, no structure described. The emphasis in the Johannine community is on the relation of the individual Christian to Jesus Christ. I should point out, though, that the Fourth Gospel offers no justification for a "Jesus and me" spirituality or a "Jesus as my personal savior" mentality. No, the sense of community, expressed in such metaphors as the vine and the branches, the shepherd and the sheep, is very strong.

Coupled with this healthy awareness of community in John is the strong consciousness that the source of direction in the community lies not in a structured hierarchy, but in the Spirit, who both replaces Jesus and makes him present. It is the Spirit who leads the community into the truth. The Spirit is the Spirit of truth and of love. What distinguishes the community is the love the members have for one another.

If Peter is the hero of Matthew's Gospel, the role of hero in the Fourth Gospel belongs to a mysterious person who is not named, but who is called "the disciple whom Jesus loved" or "the Beloved Disciple." Significantly, the

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term *apostle* never appears in the Fourth Gospel. There is no doubt that the author of the Fourth Gospel knew of the apostles (he does refer to the "Twelve"), but the distinguishing status in the Johannine Church is not apostleship, but discipleship. And it is a discipleship of equals who are loved by Jesus and who strive to love one another as he has loved them.

'I WILL GIVE YOU THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.'

Matthew 16:19

Community model

The "Beloved Disciple" is not so much the *leader* of the community as its model. It is true that Peter's position of leadership is recognized in the Fourth Gospel, as in the other three. Still he must yield prominence to the Beloved Disciple. Thus, though in the other Gospels Peter appears as spokesman for the Twelve, he cannot, in the Fourth Gospel, speak directly to Jesus at the supper banquet of love; he can only address Jesus through the intermediary of the Beloved Disciple. In the tradition of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) Peter, while following Jesus into the court of the high priest, in the end denies Jesus and abandons him, as had the rest.

John tells us that the lone male disciple who stands at the foot of the cross is the Beloved Disciple. And on Easter morn, when Peter and the Beloved Disciple run to the tomb, it is only the Beloved Disciple who believes without seeing Jesus. Then a few days later, when the disciples have gone fishing with Peter and a stranger speaks to them from the shore, it is the Beloved Disciple who recognizes the stranger and says: "It is the Lord."

Even when the office of leadership is recognized as a practical pastoral necessity, the holder of office must pass the test of the Johannine community. Peter is given the role of shepherding in the name of Jesus, but it is a role that must be based not on power, but on love. That is why, in John's Gospel, before the bestowal of office, Peter has to declare, three times(!), his love for Jesus (see Jn 21:15-19). Even then the sheep still belong to Jesus, who tells Peter, "Feed my sheep." And Peter must follow in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd: He must be ready to lay down his life for the sheep.

Women's importance

A particularly significant testimony to the egalitarian character of the Johannine Church is the attitude it shows toward women. There are narratives in the Fourth Gospel about strong women: for instance, the Samaritan woman, Mary and Martha. In the depiction and development of character and personality, their stories show them as equal in importance to the blind man and to Lazarus. Then there is the profession of faith which the Synoptics place on the lips of Peter ("You are the Christ, the Son of the living God") that becomes in the Johannine community the profession of Martha, who says: "You are the Christ, the Son of God." And on Easter morn it is not Peter, but Mary Magdalene who is the first to see the risen Jesus and give the Easter proclamation: "I have seen the Lord." This unique role wins for her the dignity of being the *apostola apostolorum* ("the apostle to the apostles").

Clearly, it is love for Jesus, not gender, that makes for equality in the community of the Beloved Disciple. Such a community could never have agreed with the pastoral epistles, with 1 Timothy 2:12, for instance, where the writer says: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man. She must be silent." Such an attitude would run quite foreign to the egalitarian thinking of the community of the Beloved Disciple.

Both Matthew's and John's understandings of Church ("ecclesiologies") taken together help us to a clearer knowledge of the fullness of the Church. Matthean ecclesiology is distinctly hierarchical: There are divinely appointed teachers whose task is to teach, admonish and instruct the rest of the members of the Church. Such an understanding, standing all by itself, can easily become rigid and inflexible. Failure to tap the resources of truth and understanding in the Church body can mean the loss of valuable insights and intuitions that exist among the faithful. A one-sided emphasis on the Matthean understanding of Church could mean (and in the history of the Church oftentimes has meant) the stifling of the Spirit dwelling in all God's people.

Johannine ecclesiology, on the other hand, though many find it more attractive, also has its shortcomings. The belief that the Spirit is present as a living divine teacher in the heart of every disciple is surely one of the great contributions to Christian faith made by the Fourth Gospel. Yet at the same time it can easily become a source of chaos, confusion and instability. What happens when disciples who have the Spirit disagree with one another? As Scripture scholar Raymond Brown said in his short but groundbreaking book *The Church the Apostles Left Behind*: "Johannine ecclesiology is the most attractive and exciting in the NT. Alas, it is also one of the least stable" (p. 123).

Matthean ecclesiology makes for stability, but with a tendency toward rigidity; Johannine ecclesiology is much more flexible, but easily leads to instability and lack of harmony. The ideal would be to combine the two; and it is the genius of the Church Catholic that it accepted into its canon of Scripture not Matthew alone, not John alone, but both Matthew and John. For this we can be grateful. And it would be wonderful if the best of the one could be combined with the best of the

other in congenial and harmonious wedlock. Yet, as we turn the pages of history, it becomes evident that efforts to wed the two have scarcely ever resulted in a perfect marriage.

I am reminded of the story of George Bernard Shaw. A young woman known for her beauty, but not her intelligence, once said to Shaw: "Imagine what a wonderful child we could have: with your mind and my body." "True," he agreed, "but there is another possibility: What if the child had my body and your brains?"

A double stirring

An ecclesiology of authority has scarcely ever lived comfortably with an understanding of Church in which there is an equality of disciples, each led and directed by the Spirit of God. There will always be Matthean Christians who will maintain that the only portal through which the Spirit can enter the Church is the hierarchy. All the living impulses in the Church, they would maintain in the extreme, originate in its official ministers.

Yet the Johannine ecclesial insight is there, enshrined in the Fourth Gospel. It insists that there is another impulse of the Spirit operating in the Church. Besides the impulse from the Spirit operating in the hierarchy, there are also stirrings of the Spirit that are experienced by, and originate in, the people of God who are outside the hierarchy.

Allowing for this double stirring of the Spirit in the Church will inevitably mean a certain amount of untidiness that would of course be absent if the only vehicle used by the Spirit were to be the hierarchy. Indeed, not only untidiness, but also disparate and opposed tendencies and trends may appear. As theologian Karl Rahner said: "When various influences flow from God into the Church, some through ministry, others directly to members of the Church who hold no office, it is clear that God alone can clearly perceive the meaning, direction and divinely willed purpose of these" (*The Spirit in the Church,* p. 64). Rahner goes on to say that ultimately there is only one thing that can give unity to the Church at the human level and that is love, "which allows another to be different, even when it does not understand him [or her]" (p. 65). It is love that the Johannine ecclesiology would pump into the Church in abundance.

When Church authority canonizes one particular trend in theology, it does a disservice to the Church. Rahner suggests that a glance into history will make clear to us that there has never been a theological trend in the Church that has been wholly and solely right and has triumphed over all others. Every theological trend in the Church has moved at best toward "magnetic north," never toward "true north." In Rahner's words: "One alone has always been completely right, the one Lord who, one in himself, has willed the many opposing tendencies in the Church." (p. 67).

Balancing Matthew and John

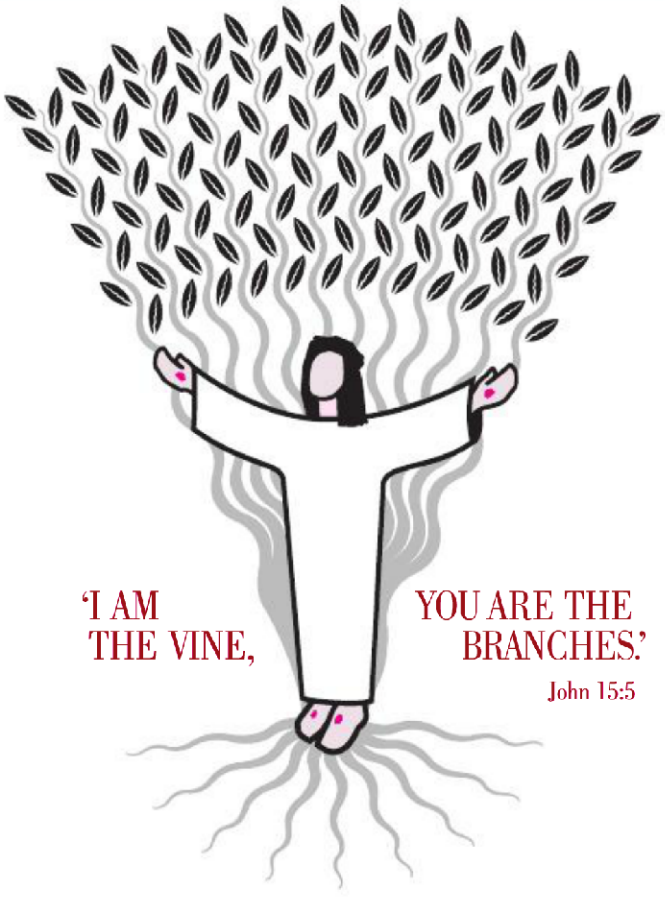
Realizing this frees one from anxiety and from the need always to be right. For much of the last century of the second millennium, the Church has operated out of a Matthean ecclesiology — and not always that ecclesiology at its best. What is needed today is the injection of a strong dose of Johannine thinking into the ecclesial mix. We cannot absolutize the role of the hierarchy, important as it is. At the same time neither can we absolutize the sense of the faithful (known in Catholic tradition as the *sensus fidelium*). We need to realize that both stirrings of the Spirit in the Church are important. We do not harmonize them by suppressing one or the other. Our only viable choice is to live with the tensions that such stirrings of the Spirit may create at a given time in our history.

Dissent, which sits uncomfortably with a Matthean ecclesiology, ought to be a very rare experience in the life of the Church. It would be rare, I believe, if Johannine ecclesiology were taken more seriously. Dissent would be rare if we had a clearer understanding of the attitude which the magisterium in the Church ought to take toward that other "stirring of the Spirit" which also operates in the Church.

To be sure, the laity must give a proper assent to the teachings of the magisterium, but what kind of attention ought the magisterium to give to the stirrings of the Spirit in God's holy people? This is an ecclesial question that has not yet been adequately addressed. Over a century and a quarter ago, John Henry Newman tried to address it in an article in the Catholic periodical *The Rambler.* His article "On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine" was not well received in his day. It was an idea whose time had not yet come.

Yet, if we accept the Johannine ecclesiology, then failure on the part of Church authority to listen to the *sensus fidelium,* the sense of the faithful, could well amount to a refusal to hear what the Spirit truly is saying to the Church, but in a way other than through magisterial teaching. Hearing the voice of concerned and committed laity is important for the life and health of the Church.

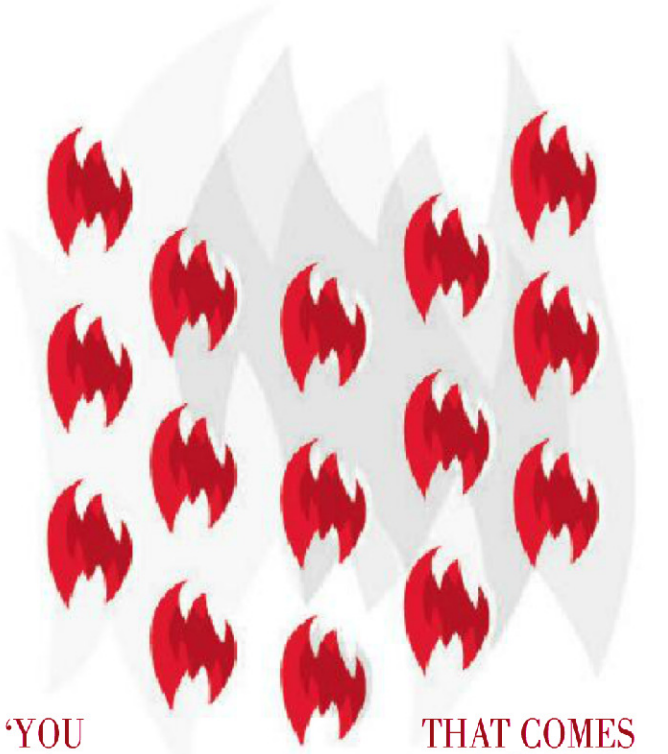
One of the questions the Church of the third millennium must face is: How can we get the voice of God's people heard in the Church? Vatican II tried to address this issue. In the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,* article 12, it says: "The



body of the faithful as a whole, who have received the anointing of the holy one, cannot err in matters of belief." The Council Fathers at this point quote Johannine ecclesiology, calling attention to the first epistle of John, 2:20, 27. Verse 20 says: "You have the anointing that comes from the holy one, and you have all knowledge." Verse 27 is even stronger: "As for you, the anointing that you have received from him remains in you, so that you do not need anyone to teach you. But his anointing teaches you about everything and is true and not false; just as it taught you, remain in him." That's a rather hearty dose of Johannine ecclesiology, even for Vatican II!

But ultimately the Council Fathers back off a bit. After speaking of the insights that this *sensus fidelium* can bring into the life of the Church, it goes on to say: "All this it does under the lead of the sacred teaching authority, to which it loyally defers."

Well, yes. But what if what the Spirit seems to be saying through the faithful is not in agreement with what hierarchy is saying? Does that automatically make it wrong? If it does, then we are in effect saying there is but a single stirring of the Spirit in the Church to which everything else that seems to be a stirring of the Spirit must yield. Or, to put this another way, the stirring of the Spirit among the people of God doesn't really count unless and until it has the approval of the hierarchy. This would be the triumph of what I have called Matthean ecclesiology.



'YOU HAVE THE ANOINTING THAT COMES FROM THE HOLY ONE.'

1 John 2:20

A new openness

So I return to what I think is the most important ecclesiological question that must be faced in the third millennium: How can we get the voice of God's people heard in the Church? One of the things I think needs to happen is a change in attitude on the part of the magisterium, especially the Roman Magisterium. They must move away from the position that they are expected to have all the answers to an attitude of listening to public opinion in the Church. In 1959 (before the Council was convened) Karl Rahner wrote that Church leaders need human help as well as divine.

In his book *Free Speech in the Church* Father Rahner said, "Public opinion is one of the means whereby the Church's official leaders, *who need human help as well as divine,* get to know something about the actual situation within which and taking account of which, they are to lead and guide the people. They need to know how people are thinking and feeling, what they have set their hearts and wishes on, what their problems are, what they find difficult, in what respects their feelings have changed, where they find the traditional answers or rulings insufficient, what they would like to see changed...and so on" (p. 22).

This of course will make unaccustomed demands on Church leaders, in the way of patience and a greater openness to dialogue. It will also call them to an admission of a certain degree of uncertainty on some issues and a willingness to wait for time and dialogue to bring greater clarity. It will mean that Church teaching and policy will be less assured that it always has the right position. This will call for a greater flexibility and a more hospitable openness to change than has been true in the past.

To create such harmony between theological positions, which so easily can be at cross-purposes with one another, is surely one of the great challenges the Church faces in the third millennium. Yet the challenge must be faced, if today's Church is to be faithful to the insight of the Church Catholic which chose to receive into its canon of inspired Scripture, not just Matthew but also John. It must be ready to continue to live with the inevitable tensions which that choice has necessarily bequeathed to the Church. ■

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UPDATE

Question Box

1) How do you see the Spirit guiding your parish? Your home?

2) How does your view of Church affect your participation?

3) Why is hierarchy needed in the Church?

4) How do we reconcile the differences in the Gospels?

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