

## *Book Reviews*



### **Luca Badini Confalonieri**

*Democracy in the Christian Church: An Historical, Theological and Political Case*  
(Ecclesiological Investigations, 16; London and New York: T&T Clark, 2012),  
xi + 286 pp. ISBN 978-0-567-44952-8 (hbk). £70.00.

This impressive treatise by a young scholar argues for a radical rethinking of the theory and an equally radical reform of the practice of authority and governance in the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). It comprises a sophisticated, inter-disciplinary, massively referenced and largely persuasive piece of advocacy that deserves to be taken seriously by all concerned for the reform of the RC Church's ideology and structures and will also prove useful to advanced students of ecclesiology and ecclesiastical polity. The book's aim is the democratization of the RCC. This is clearly a huge mountain to climb. The authority structure of the RCC is an anvil that has worn out many hammers. Pope Francis has taken several steps in the direction that Luca Badini Confalonieri wants to go, but a very long journey still lies ahead and there can be no assurance that the desired end will be reached in the author's lifetime (certainly not in mine). The heart of Confalonieri's argument is as follows.

The present exercise of authority in the RCC and its system of governance are authoritarian and dictatorial, the opposite of participatory and democratic. The RCC rejects for the conduct of its own life the principles that underpin democracy and which it now endorses in the civil sphere (though this is a modern development: absolute monarchy was seen until recently as the divinely sanctioned form of governance in the state as well as the church). These democratic principles include: freedom of speech and public discussion; the right to dissent; a constitutional basis for authority; the representation of the people; the need for the consent of the governed to decisions and laws that affect them. But in place of these virtuous democratic principles the RCC still maintains censorship of speech and writing as it concerns office-holders, including lay theologians; dissent is treated as apostasy; the principles of constitutionality, representation and consent (the key principles of the Conciliar Movement)

are not accepted. The exercise of authority in the RCC is widely perceived as perverse and almost incomprehensible. Its form of governance is a massive stumbling block to faith and severely damages its mission. It induces incredulity and has become a scandal to many.

Furthermore, the efficiency of an enterprise depends on its maximising access to the relevant insights and information that can be brought to bear on problems and challenges, internal and external. Every community has at its disposal a shared fund of knowledge, insight and judgement, which is dispersed among the members. But the RCC centralises not only executive authority, but also the competences on which it should be based. There is no requirement on the magisterium to consult the experts and to weight their advice. It has no effective way of consulting the *sensus fidelium* and ignores the views of the lower clergy and the lay faithful. It withholds participation in governance from the laity, even though Vatican II affirms that they receive through baptism a share in Christ's regal, as well as his prophetic and priestly offices. Already, in the sixteenth century, John Calvin accused the RCC of infantilizing its members. Any society that stifles public debate and disallows criticism is heading for eventual dissolution (p. 231).

Luca Badini Confaloniere argues that this state of affairs is not simply an organisational challenge; it is an ethical issue, bearing on responsible stewardship of the church's mission. In terms of Bernard Lonergan's methodology, which he has studied closely, the twin imperatives for the church are to think intelligently, drawing on all relevant sources of knowledge and insight, and then to act responsibly, for the common good. When these ethical imperatives are flouted, the conscience of the faithful is offended. Roman Catholic social teaching endorses the principle of subsidiarity which means that the 'higher' level is subsidiary to the 'lower', not the other way round, and that it is within the remit of the lower to decide whether responsibility should be passed to a higher level. The author believes that it is 'immoral' that the subsidiarity principle is systematically negated in RC polity (p. 123).

The author devotes considerable space to refuting the claim, associated with Cardinal Bellarmine in the sixteenth century and Cardinal Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI in the twentieth that, because the Church is a divinely-created mystery, its organisation cannot be assimilated to human, earthly, political structures and that what political philosophy has to teach us has no bearing on the matter (p. 101). Drawing mainly on secondary sources at this point, particularly Francis Oakley's work on the conciliar tradition, Luca Badini Confaloniere has no difficulty in demonstrating that throughout history the church has borrowed, without apology, from both the theory and the

practice of political philosophy. In the early church, the house churches were modelled on the Roman *domus* and the first councils took their shape from the Graeco-Roman public assemblies. Medieval canonists drew on the legacy of Roman corporation law to formulate the concept of *plenitudo potestatis* (fullness of power) as an attribute of the papacy, while conciliarists seized on the corporationist axiom *quod omnes tangit*, etc. (what affects all must be decided by all) (p. 38). The validity of natural law for church law was unquestioned. While papalists drew on natural law to support papal authority, conciliarists appealed to it to challenge what they saw as oppressive man-made positive laws in the church.

Such indebtedness respects the traditional doctrine of the relation of nature and grace, reason and revelation. The cognitive and moral operations that enable us to know intelligently and to decide responsibly are the same in civil and in Christian communities. We are not given a different brain when we are baptised. The structure of human intentionality is, as Lonergan insisted, generic and universal. Just as personal Christian ethics uncontroversially presupposes and builds on natural ethical principles, so too Christian social ethics – including the ethical dimension of the exercise of authority and the taking of decisions – should presuppose and build on natural social ethics. Social ethics is, as it were, the applied form of political philosophy; and ecclesiastical polity is the applied form of ecclesiology. The church has need of political philosophy in its ecclesiology and of social ethics in its polity. Ecclesiology and political philosophy exist in a symbiotic relationship because the structure of intentionality and action in each is analogous. Ecclesiology needs political philosophy in order to attain a critical, explanatory and systematic level (p. 130).

For a Roman Catholic, this author's platform goes well beyond the general run of 'critical solidarity', which has now reached colossal proportions. Here are a few of Confaloniere's more striking assertions. There is no basis in Scripture or history for the claim that the bishops of Rome succeeded St Peter and that Peter's role in the church lives on in the papacy (p. 86). *Ius divinum* should not be claimed for any ecclesiastical institution (episcopacy, papacy) unless there is specific scriptural authority for it, which there is not (p. 77). The contingencies of history and development, combined with the vagueness of appeals to divine providence, render *ius divinum* an unusable concept. A church can exist without *episkope*, indeed without 'any ecclesial structure', provided there is a community based on shared values and meanings, though oversight might contribute to its *bene esse* (pp. 91, 96, 129). This is more radical, more subversive, than Martin Luther himself (who sat lightly to the institutional shape of the church) and somewhat undercuts the thrust of the whole book

towards structural reform of the RCC. Finally, it is bizarre that the section (2.4) entitled 'From the Reformation to Vatican II' says absolutely nothing about the Reformation! But to show how the Reformers drew on the insights of the earlier Conciliar Movement for their reform programme would probably have proved even more neuralgic for the RC authorities than the discussion of the conciliar tradition itself.

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