

# WHEN CARDINALS CLASH IN PUBLIC, IT'S SERIOUS

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## The Kasper-Ratzinger Debate & The State of the Church

My priest and I occasionally share articles with each other in an ongoing amicable discussion about the state of the Church. He recently gave me a copy of an article written by Walter Cardinal Kasper entitled "On the Church" from the Jesuit magazine *America* (April 23-30, 2001), which was directed against Cardinal Ratzinger by name. My priest suggested that the comparatively young Kasper might make a good pope someday ("Kasper, the friendly pope?"), perhaps right after Cardinal Martini of Milan, who, he said, might make a good immediate successor to Pope John Paul II. Both Kasper and Martini are described in current discussions about papable cardinals as "leaning left" on various issues. Now, my priest is no flaming liberal. He describes himself generally (and accurately) as "orthodox," though he views himself as a "moderate" on pastoral issues. His willingness to align himself with Kasper (against Ratzinger) in this debate, as well as his favorable remarks about Martini, represent a fairly widespread point of view within the Church today, which I would like to examine.

The Kasper-Ratzinger debate began, as Ratzinger notes in a follow-up article entitled "The Local Church and the Universal Church: A Response to Walter Kasper" (*America*, Nov. 19, 2001), when Kasper had an article published that sharply criticized the *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church as Communion*, published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, of which Ratzinger is the head. Ratzinger forthrightly characterized Kasper's original article, originally published in 1999, as an "attack." I do not intend to review the history of this debate or go into all its details, but rather to examine a few points raised by Kasper's 2001 *America* article which seem representative of a much broader conflict among Catholics today. It is a conflict between those, on the one hand, who are concerned to safeguard the unity of

traditional faith and morals, and those, on the other hand, who are concerned with keeping abreast with the changing times. It is a conflict that rather ominously pits Cardinal against Cardinal in public debate. The conflict has escalated to the point where opponents of Rome's supposed rigidity, fossilization, and legalism seem to be working with an understanding of the Church that is quite alien, if not unintelligible, to non-revisionist Catholics.

Kasper's article, beneath its complicated details, is animated by the desire to secure greater "pastoral flexibility" in areas where a gap seems to be widening between the Church's official positions and the actual practices of many local churches. It is a fact that the Church's official positions tend to be implemented with increasing reluctance, if not simply ignored, in many local churches throughout the world, particularly in countries such as the U.S., Canada, Australia, Japan, and the nations of western Europe. Areas of disagreement and contention with the Vatican include, according to Kasper, "ethical issues, sacramental discipline and ecumenical practices." This likely translates into the Church's widely controverted and ignored prohibitions against homosexual acts, premarital cohabitation, and "remarriage" outside the Church — and her ban prohibiting those involved in these things, or those whose affiliation is non-Catholic, from receiving Holy Communion. There is also the matter of contraception. It is widely known that there are bishops and priests who favor an open communion policy, and that few would turn away anyone approaching the altar, whatever his sexual practice, marital status, or church affiliation. Cardinal Martini of Milan has been reported as saying, for instance, that the Church has no business getting involved in the personal morals of individual Catholics. As we shall see, Kasper seems inclined to agree with this perspective.

It is humbling to consider the pressures faced by bishops and priests from the surrounding contemporary culture. I can only imagine how hard it must be to stand with Rome when Rome is widely portrayed in the media (and perceived by one's own parishioners) as the last bastion of repressive, ignorant, patriarchal authoritarianism. What is one to do when the inner meaning of the Catholic Faith and Tradition is so far removed from the world's understanding of things? What is one to do when so many Catholics themselves share the world's ignorance and indifference regarding the Church's teachings, practice contraception, approve of abortion, cohabit before marriage, enter into active homosexual partnerships, divorce and "remarry" outside the Church — *and* regard themselves as members in good standing in their parishes? What is one to do when non-Catholic denominations, in a spirit of Christian brotherhood, adopt a policy of open communion, making Rome's position seem uncharitable, closed-minded, reactionary, and arrogant? When all of Paris is storming the Bastille, the slightest hesitation to join in the rioting may easily get one tarred as a member of the *ancien régime*.

The body of Kasper's article is devoted to making a case for greater pastoral flexibility, primarily by stressing the need to "balance" the Church's legitimate concern for "unity" with a greater allowance for ecclesial "diversity" at the local level. One danger of such diversity is that it could threaten to reduce the Catholic Church to a federation of local or national churches. This, in fact, is what Avery Cardinal Dulles, a specialist in ecclesiology, stressed in his response to Kasper's *America* article in *Inside the Vatican*

magazine (June 2001). Shortly thereafter, in an article entitled "Reflections on Walter Kasper's 'On the Church'" (*America*, July 30-Aug. 6), Archbishop Charles Chaput declared that Ratzinger's concerns about Church unity are "well-founded," calling "excessive pluralism, local particularism and religious nationalism" real current threats, along with the tendency of bishops and bishops' conferences to "abdicate their responsibility" by letting Rome take the heat for handling problems *they* should address.

Another danger implicit in the current calls for "diversity" and "pastoral flexibility" is that certain kinds of compromises in areas of ecclesiastical "discipline" (such as a policy of open communion for non-Catholics, practicing homosexuals, and Catholics "remarried" outside the Church) are leading to widespread rejection of Church *doctrines* that those areas of ecclesiastical discipline uphold (such as the very authority of the Catholic Church, the reservation of sex for marriage, and the indissolubility of marriage).

I find it disturbing that Kasper, in arguing for pastoral "elbow room," employs a strategy of shifting the discussion away from questions of "doctrine" and toward questions of "discipline." He asserts: "the debate is not about any point of 'Catholic doctrine'" — a claim he repeats frequently, even while admitting that norms of discipline were often "created to support, closely or loosely, some doctrinal position." I doubt that matters of "discipline" can always be isolated from matters of "doctrine" as clearly as Kasper at times suggests.

Another strategy Kasper uses to divert attention away from the implications of his proposals for faith and morals is to suggest that the disagreements at issue fall into the category of those where the Church has historically recognized *legitimate* differences of opinion. Thus he suggests that the disagreements addressed in his article are reducible to differences in *emphases* between himself and Cardinal Ratzinger, or between the First and Second Vatican Councils, or between the historical Platonic or Aristotelian approaches (reflected, for example, in the respective emphases of Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas). This suggests to the unwitting reader that certain questions of faith and morals (the indissolubility of marriage, the immorality of sex outside of marriage, etc.) may fall into the category of changeable matters of differing interpretation and legitimate debate, like certain matters of ecclesiastical discipline (such as "fish on Fridays" or priestly celibacy).

Yet Kasper is also concerned to avoid being perceived as too far afield from the bastion of Ratzinger's orthodoxy. Thus he repeatedly takes precautions to "balance" his statements with caveats against being misinterpreted as denying the need for unity, papal primacy, etc. This caution becomes most apparent where Kasper tries his hardest to distinguish his own position from Ratzinger's and to formulate a theological justification for his position. This is not easy: He must ground his position in orthodoxy precisely at the point where he wishes to justify his dissent from Vatican policy. Kasper admits everything Ratzinger has previously argued about the origin and "pre-existence" of the Church in the eternal will of God, prior to all the accidents of historical development. But Kasper then proceeds to deny that the "pre-existence" of the Church can be used to argue for Ratzinger's view of the "ontological primacy of the universal church" over the local

churches. Kasper argues, instead, for the "simultaneous pre-existence of the universal church and the particular churches." This is the essence of Kasper's argument for decentralizing Church governance. In articulating his understanding of decentralization, Kasper goes so far as to say: "The local church is neither a province nor a department of the universal church.... The local bishop is not the delegate of the pope...."

In his subsequent response to Kasper, Ratzinger does not dispute Kasper's assertion that the Universal Church and local churches are implied in one another. Indeed, he writes, "I can certainly accept this formula.... But it misses the actual point at issue as seen in reference to the 'pre-existence' of the church." The point, he says, is that there is only one Bride, only one Body of Christ, not many brides or many bodies. That the one Body has many parts does not abrogate the superordinating principle of unity. Diversity becomes richness only through underlying unity.

The problem is that when Kasper, like many Catholics today, hears the term "Universal Church," he immediately thinks of the pope, the Curia, and the presumed problem of "centralism" (over-centralization) in the Church. But as Ratzinger points out, this makes no sense, because the church of Rome is a local church, even with its peculiar, universal responsibility. The theological question of the precedence of the Universal Church (e.g., the Body) over particular churches (organs) has nothing whatever to do with any presumed ploy of "Roman centralism." Such associations betray a serious misunderstanding of the concrete reality of the Catholic Church as described in the Second Vatican Council's *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* and also the extent to which politicized misconceptions about the Church (fed by Marxist, feminist, egalitarian, populist, and deconstructive impulses) have become prevalent even among Catholics. Ratzinger wonders at how such associations could come up "even with so great a theologian as Kasper."

The real point at issue in Kasper's disagreement with Ratzinger is probably less apparent in anything he affirms or denies *theologically* than in some of his less cautious statements about *history* and *Scripture*. He constantly emphasizes the historical aspect of the Church. The Church, he says, is a "concrete historical reality," which, under the guidance of God's Spirit, "unfolds in history." In light of this, he infers that it is "to history, therefore, [that] we must turn for sound theology." As if aware that this might leave us feeling adrift on a sea of historical relativism, he then asks how we are to find our way among the complex data of history. His answer: "The starting point must be Scriptures." Immediately, he then turns — and from this we can see what animates him — to an exegetical discussion of New Testament passages that seem to identify the Greek word for "church" (*ekklesia*) with the local church or even a domestic community, instead of the Universal Church. His exegesis is one-sided, of course; but the important thing to note here is that his interest in the decentralization of Church authority is aided by the interpretive "wiggle room" provided by freelance historical and biblical interpretation.

This particular way of emphasizing history and Scripture strikes me as a familiar replay of the old Protestant historical-critical tradition, whose presuppositions about history and Scripture furnish a surefire recipe for deconstructing the historic Christian Faith (by

reinterpreting "history") in order to reconstruct it again in one's own image (by reinterpreting "Scripture"). History serves as the playground for scratching up doubts about certain areas of the Church's traditional teachings, and Scripture serves as the toolbox for cobbling together a new version of the Faith modeled after the personal preferences of the cobbler. This is exactly what happened in German theology within a few generations of Luther's death. The key players in this development belong to a long line of German theologians (Reimarus, Michaelis, Semmler, Herder, Eichorn, Schleiermacher, Strauss, Baur, Wellhausen, Harnack, Gunkel, Bultmann, et al.) stretching all the way from the 17th century up to our own day. These stepchildren of the Reformation summarily undermined the traditional "Christ of Faith" by subjecting the "Jesus of history" to demythologizing reinterpretations based on the anti-supernaturalist bias inherited from the so-called Age of Reason. But as Albert Schweitzer mercilessly showed in his celebrated *Quest for the Historical Jesus* (1906), the historical Jesus "discovered" by such liberal Protestant theologians was nothing more than a Jesus they "constructed" as a mirror image of themselves. He was not God Incarnate, but simply a "great moral teacher," whose morals just happened to look like Kant's or Hegel's. Closer to our own time, similarly, Jesus is "discovered" to be a gentle healer, a hippie-sage, a charismatic prophet, a founder of self-esteem and self-realization movements, a proto-Marxist, or a champion of feminism and political correctness.

It is disconcerting to see the number of Catholic theologians infected by this liberal Protestant virus, and Kasper does not seem immune.

In the first place, Kasper's statement that we must turn to *history* in order to establish a sound theology suggests the currently pervasive tendency of historical relativism. But to try to construct a coherent theology, as he suggests, by taking history as one's starting point makes no more sense than trying to teach one's children what is morally right and wrong by having them read history books. This way of viewing history as *the* fundamental reality, though typical of the historicist emphasis of German universities since the time of Hegel, is utterly at odds with the Catholic Faith. In fact, it opens the door to the kinds of deconstructive impulses chronicled by Luke Timothy Johnson in *The Real Jesus* — impulses embraced with a vengeance by Robert Funk's notorious Jesus Seminar, tacitly accepted by many diocesan seminaries (whose administrators recognize their own incompetence to assess them), and then unwittingly transmitted in many parish Bible studies. All too often, instructors uncritically accept the results of scholarly references to "form criticism," "redaction criticism," and hypotheses like "JEDP" and "Q" (supposed sources used by biblical writers), without realizing that they are thereby transmitting, in many cases, theories about the Bible saturated with the relativist biases of liberal Protestantism or secular anti-supernaturalism.

In the second place, Kasper's statement about taking *Scripture* as the starting point for interpreting historical development (tradition) sounds disconcertingly Protestant. Cardinal Newman clearly saw the futility of the Protestant approach two centuries ago when he declared that one cannot hope to derive the whole of Catholic theology directly from Scripture (anymore than one can hope to derive it from an "impartial study" of history). Scripture cannot be our "starting point" in resolving questions of doctrine. Some

Catholics opt for the principle of the "material sufficiency" of Scripture, holding that the Bible contains or implies all the basic data necessary for Christian doctrine, over against the traditional "two source" principle of "Scripture *and* Tradition," which states that Scripture is insufficient without the supplement of Tradition. But even proponents of "material sufficiency" recognize that Scripture only *indirectly attests* to certain Catholic doctrines (such as Purgatory or the Trinity). Not every Catholic doctrine is explicitly mentioned in the Bible. Hence, even Catholic theologians who profess the "material sufficiency" of Scripture do not go so far as to claim that it is "formally sufficient." That is, if they understand what they're talking about, they don't assume that the material content of Scripture is so clear that we don't need Apostolic Tradition or the Magisterium to interpret it. Without a normative tradition of biblical understanding and a Church to teach us that understanding, the Bible becomes a Pandora's Box, which opens up untold varieties of monstrous interpretations. The Nazi theologians, Kittel and Hirsch, it is said, interpreted "Christ" in the New Testament to stand for the spirit of National Socialism. The fragmentation of Protestantism into hundreds of splinter groups, teaching various and often conflicting versions of the Gospel since the 16th century, bears ample testimony to the bankruptcy of *sola Scriptura* as a principle of exclusive and final authority.

Kasper's references to Scripture and history are highly selective. Given his opposition to centralized Church authority, this is not surprising. He refers to Pauline epistles where the Greek word for "church" (*ekklesia*) is used to refer to a local particular church, and he refers to passages in Luke where it can signify a domestic community. But he downplays the texts where it is used to refer to the Universal Church, and sidesteps any passages bearing even a hint of a hierarchical, centralized authority in apostolic times. For example, in his letter to the Galatians, Paul, who declares (Gal. 1:1) that he is an apostle "not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ" (whom he personally encountered on the road to Damascus), nevertheless *submits himself to Peter*, by consulting him for 15 days before beginning his ministry (Gal. 1:18), and again 14 years later when he submitted what he was preaching among the gentiles to the leaders in Jerusalem for their evaluation, "lest somehow I should be running in vain" (Gal. 2:1-2).

Kasper wants to argue that the early Church was decentralized, that it developed from "local communities," and that its centralized, hierarchical structure was a late development. Accordingly, he states that the practice of meeting and deliberating in synods developed in the third century, that it was the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325 that for the first time "gave the many churches a unifying structure," and that early statements about the Roman church "presiding in charity" (such as found in Ignatius of Antioch) should not be read as implying "universal jurisdiction in doctrine and discipline" — all common Protestant cavils.

Yet Scripture and Tradition amply testify to the presence of a centralized authority structure from the beginning of the Church. Not only does the New Testament show Christ explicitly commissioning the Twelve, investing them with power (to heal, cast out demons, etc.) and authority (to teach, baptize, forgive sins, "bind and loose," etc.), but also proclaiming that He will establish His Church upon Peter, whose name He changes from "Simon" to "Cephas" (deriving from the Aramaic word for "Rock"), and bestowing

upon him the unique power of the "Keys of the Kingdom." Petrine primacy is evident even from the circumstantial details of the citation of the Twelve in the New Testament. For example, the second most commonly cited apostle in the New Testament is John, "the beloved disciple," whose name appears a total of 30 times. But the most frequently cited apostle, Peter, is mentioned *179 times*, and in each listing of a group of the apostles, regardless of the order in which the others are named, his name *always heads* the list. Beyond this, there are numerous additional things one could point to, such as the manner in which Peter exercises leadership in the selection of Judas's successor in the first chapter of Acts, or his prominent role in the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), even though the Council took place in the city where, according to tradition, James was the local bishop.

The hierarchical structure of the early Church is amply attested in the New Testament. The first episcopal synod, far from occurring in the *third* century after Christ, is recorded in the Book of Acts as having taken place under the episcopal oversight of Peter and James themselves, in Jerusalem, where they met to deliberate over norms of ecclesiastical discipline to be imposed on gentile Christians in distant *Antioch* (in modern-day Turkey). Moreover, to underline the divine authority of their decree, they explicitly identify their decision with the will of the Holy Spirit, declaring: "it has seemed good *to the Holy Spirit and to us* to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things" (Acts 15:28, emphasis added). Further, the New Testament itself uses the hierarchical distinctions between bishops, priests, and deacons, even if the writers are not careful to note exactly how bishops are also priests, yet differ from other priests in their office. In any case, it is abundantly clear from the writings of Ignatius of Antioch around the end of the first century that this threefold distinction was already widely in use and conceptually clear. Furthermore, as early as A.D. 80, we see the bishop of *Rome* (Pope Clement I, in a letter to the church in Corinth) exercising his authority over a local church in distant *Greece*, simply *assuming* that his jurisdiction extends to all particular churches in certain matters of ecclesiastical discipline.

In an amusing note in his response to Kasper, Ratzinger observes how Kasper, in his eagerness to oppose the primacy of the Universal Church, invokes J. Gnilka, claiming that "in Paul the local community is the focus." Ratzinger points out that Rudolf Bultmann — that great Protestant demythologizer who could never be accused of having a bias in favor of reviving Roman centralism — claims the very opposite. Bultmann wrote: "the church's organization grew primarily out of the awareness that the community as a whole takes precedence over the individual communities. A symptom of this is that the word *ekklesia* [church] is used to refer, in the first instance, by no means to the individual community but to the `people of God'.... The notion of the priority of the church as a whole over the individual community is further seen in the equation of the *ekklesia* with the *soma Christou* [body of Christ], which embraces all believers." Whatever the faults of Bultmann, he stood outside the controversies of *our* day. Perhaps for that reason, says Ratzinger, he "was able to read and expound the texts with a more open mind."

My priest understands, better than I, how daunting the task of administering an organization as vast and diverse as the Catholic Church must be. Even in our own parish, in addition to three weekend Masses in English, we have one in Spanish, another in Hmong, yet another in Lahu. The integrity of different national cultures and customs must be respected, as well as the evangelical task of "inculturation" (translating the Gospel into the cultural forms intelligible and appropriate to different peoples). At the same time, the unity and integrity of the Faith must not be sacrificed. The difficulties posed by ethnic particularism are genuine. Differences of language, custom, and tradition must be bridged, with pastoral discernment.

But not all diversity and pluralism has to do with ethnic and cultural differences, which are benign, even if challenging. Some kinds of diversity have to do with differences of value-orientation, such as the differences between proponents and opponents of traditional family values, same-sex "marriages," abortion rights, etc. Ultimately, such differences often come down to the difference between belief and unbelief, fidelity and apostasy. Such differences are not benign. Care and discernment are necessary, but there are some issues in which there is no room for "pastoral flexibility." Even in our own parish, I am sometimes concerned that too much voice is given to the perspectives of cultural accommodation and dissent. My priest knows this, and I think ongoing conversations like ours can be helpful.

I realize that pastors must exercise great prudence in administering their flocks. Not every difference of opinion has a clearly right and wrong side. But neither does it require the wisdom of Solomon to tell which way the wind is blowing these days. With few exceptions, the results of Catholic catechesis over the past forty years has been dismal. We Catholics, both laity and clergy, are all too often abysmally ignorant of our own Tradition. For more than two generations now, we have been robbed of the fullness of Catholicism, which is our birthright. With a few thankful exceptions, our collective acquaintance with Scripture is piecemeal, our knowledge of Tradition is pathetic, our hymns are embarrassing, our religious art is ugly, our churches look like U.N. meditation chapels, our ethics are slipshod, and our aesthetic and spiritual sensibilities are so far from being sublime that they almost look ridiculous.

No wonder a gap is widening between the Church's official teachings and the actual practices of many local churches! No wonder the Church's official positions are implemented with increasing reluctance or simply ignored! For over two generations our faith formation has been shaped by a media culture that has portrayed our Church as a dinosaur that is either an impediment to social progress or simply irrelevant. We are blinded by ignorance. Where there is no vision, the people perish. The truth is that our Church's traditions and teachings have not been tried and found wanting; they have been found demanding and are no longer tried.

This is where I want to tell my priest and other pastors of our Church: "Don't be afraid. If you teach them, they will come!" It would be the height of cowardice and betrayal for our bishops to run their dioceses the way President Clinton ran his administration — by consulting opinion polls. We need to be told the truth and held accountable, not invited to

indulge our whims and inclinations. For bishops to let Rome take the heat for unpopular teachings and practices while neglecting to address these themselves is, yes, cowardice and betrayal, but also abdication of the responsibility of their sacred office. This is the pervasive problem today — the reason why dioceses run by such bishops are bereft of priestly vocations, the reason why the second largest "denomination" in the United States today, after Catholics, is *inactive Catholics*.