

## **Cathedrals and Their Ministers: Some Reflections**

Lawrence S. Cunningham

*O Lord, I love the house in which you dwell and the place where  
your glory dwells. (Psalm 26:8)*

### **Introduction**

I should like to begin this talk today with two personal anecdotes that focus on two cathedrals that are geographically at opposite ends of the continental United States and radically different in their architectural style as well as founded under quite different circumstances to serve quite different cultural needs.

When the new cathedral was dedicated in Los Angeles a few years ago there was much harrumphing in certain quarters about the waste of monies which, the critics charged, could be used for other good purposes than for building a “monument.” I had actually received inquiries from various media people to comment on this charge. The inquiries were not always benign ones. My own reaction was that such criticisms remind me of what was said (borrowing from an Oscar Wilde *bon mot*) about the Bourbons of the Kingdom of Naples: they knew the cost of everything and the value of nothing. Cathedrals are worth the expense. No thing of beauty is without merit. Thus: my address today will stipulate the cathedrals exhibit values that are peculiar to and exemplary of the theological term “catholic.”

Second: On my frequent visits to New York City to visit my daughters who live and work there I almost always pay a visit to Saint Patrick’s Cathedral which is inevitably thronged with casual tourists who “do” the sights along Fifth Avenue. My reaction in observing those crowds is always the same: why doesn’t the cathedral staff

have people at the entrances there to greet the visitors, hand them a prayer card, and invite them to sit quietly and pray? Does this lack reflect a failure of imagination? Does it not miss an opportunity to invite prayer and interest in the faith? Thus: my address today will also reflect on the cathedral as a place for evangelization.

On the above points I would simply note that every cathedral is valuable in its own right precisely as a cathedral and, secondly, such places are opportunities for evangelization. I want to think about cathedrals not as architectural specimens<sup>1</sup> but as integral to what Catholicism is all about both in itself and as an active agent within our common human history.

### **Some General Observations**

Cathedrals, with some obvious exceptions like Notre Dame in Paris, Chartres, etc. do not attract great throngs if they are not well marked on tourist brochures. Historically speaking, some cathedrals in their glory days were the precise destinations of pilgrims as surely was the case of Canterbury and, again of Chartres. Chartres is perhaps the most egregious example because, as Otto Von Simpson demonstrated in a brilliant study many decades ago,<sup>2</sup> not only did Chartres possess the gown of Our Lady which drew pilgrim throngs but the good people of Chartres sponsored major fairs – the *lendits* – that coincided with the four great feasts of the Virgin (Annunciation, Dormition, Nativity, and Presentation) established centuries before by Pope Sergius. Thus, that great church was a magnetic force that drew its energy by that most powerful of combination: deep piety, the popularity of pilgrimage, and commerce. Chartres was also, let us not forget, a center of

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<sup>1</sup> There are many interesting observations about the theological significance of architecture in Richard Kieckhefer's *Theology in Stone: Church Architecture from Byzantium to Berkeley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Otto Von Simpson. *The Gothic Cathedral*. expanded and revised edition. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

learning. Indeed, we could take a little detour in this presentation to think about how cathedral schools lived in tandem, and, in some cases, overtook monastic schools in the high middle ages. It is that synergism of piety, economics, and learning that impelled Henry Adams to write that odd but compelling *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* (1913). Adams was a romantic but he captured something important about the power of the medieval cathedral.

In a catechesis on medieval cathedrals at his weekly audience in November, 2009 pope Benedict made two contemporary points that we could learn from the great Romanesque and gothic cathedrals of the past: First, Their artistic expression is unintelligible except against the background of the religious motivation that inspired the art and, secondly, and more importantly, the beauty they expressed in their architecture and art is, in the pope's words, a privileged and fascinating way to approach the Mystery of God – it is, in the words of the pope, the *via pulchritudinis*.<sup>3</sup> The conclusion is inescapable: there is nothing to be gained by producing ugly or mediocre art for divine use.

Cathedrals are, however, first of all, churches and their dedications are circumscribed by, and celebrated with, the most conspicuous forms of liturgical ritual as stipulated by Canon 1217.2 of the new code. They are bathed, anointed, incensed, exorcised, and prayed over in rites that are analogous to baptism. They are sacred places. Their episcopal chairs represent the office of the chief teacher of the local church, the bishop, and it is within their precincts that many of the defining characteristics of the tradition of the Catholic Faith are performed; it is there that priests are ordained and it is there that the array of chrisms are blessed to be used in the churches under the

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<sup>3</sup> I relied on the translation supplied by Zenit for November 18, 2009.

jurisdiction of the bishop who, in turn, was ordained and installed in the cathedral itself. The cathedral after all is a visible sign not only of the episcopal presence but, in truth, cathedrals are interdependent in that the visible nature of the unity of the church depends on the unity of the various episcopal chairs and their occupants. The cathedral is meaningless unless it is seen in the context of all cathedrals. Commenting on the cathedra within the cathedral itself, Richard Vosko makes the intelligent observation that “The Chair is not personal to the sitting bishop or archbishop but is a sign of the ‘unity of believer’ with the rest of the Catholic world. Thus the common practice of incorporating the coat of arms into the furnishings should be eliminated... The bishop’s staff or crook would be a better symbol than any coat of arms.”<sup>4</sup>

The inscription over the doors of the Lateran basilica, the episcopal seat of the bishop of Rome, is no idle boast: *Omnium ecclesiarum mater et caput*. The See of Rome is the mother and head of all the churches because the Lateran *cathedra* is the symbolic linchpin for episcopal unity. The unity which is a mark of the church is a unity between Saint John Lateran and the other cathedrals of the world and not, as the understandable shorthand has it, the Vatican.

There is also a profound ecclesiological truth behind that inscription above the lintel of Saint John Lateran. It would be a useful line of inquiry – one which I must resist in this presentation – to elaborate the role of the cathedral as a sign of unity not only with respect to the unity of the bishop with his Presbyterate but with the college of bishops united among themselves and with Peter. That unity, after all, is one of the hallmarks of the theological term “catholicity.” There is a good paper on ecclesiology to be written using this theme. It should also be noted and perhaps lamented that little literature exists

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<sup>4</sup> Richard S. Vosko. *God’s House is Our House*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006). 93-94.

on the theological and ecclesiological significances of cathedrals. What one finds, as I will indicate below, are mainly canonical, historical and architectural studies of cathedrals.

The decree on the pastoral office of bishops (*Christus Dominus*) promulgated in 1965 has such a powerful list of episcopal obligations that one wonders when and for how long bishops get to sleep if they are obedient to all of its exhortations. It is curious, however, that the word “cathedral” never occurs in that document. A bit further on in this paper, inspired by what *Christus Dominus* does say I will meditate at length on the nexus between bishop and cathedral.

With respect to the cathedral building itself and its interiors I am too inexpert to comment.<sup>5</sup> Nor is it possible to generalize because cathedral A may be in the inner city and of vintage character while cathedral B may be in a spacious main square while cathedral C may be an aesthetic relic while Cathedral D may be forbiddingly *au courant*. I am centrally concerned, in these reflections, to think about the cathedral, given its prominent place in ecclesiological symbolism, as an instrument of both of Eucharistic unity and evangelization. To those topics I now turn with special reference to those who minister at a cathedral.

Let me begin by noting again how sparse are the usual ecclesiastical sources relative to cathedrals. If one inspects the meticulous indices to Norman Tanner’s two volume *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990) one finds that only two councils (Lateran IV and Trent) even mention cathedrals and in both cases are mainly concerned with abuses relative to the funds held in trust for the canons and prebends attached to cathedrals. Since neither office is

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<sup>5</sup> See: Vosko: 181-188 for some observations.

common in the United States these reforming canons are of little import for us. The authoritative *Catechism of the Catholic Church* does not even list the word “cathedral” in its index of subjects. However, there are some fruitful reflections in the New Code of Canon Law (1983) that does reflect on the role of the bishop in his local church articulated in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (#41). Canon 389 stipulates that the bishop is to preside frequently over the celebration of the Eucharist in the cathedral or another church in his diocese especially on Holy Days of Obligation and other solemnities. That stipulation is underscored by canon 899.2 which says that “In the Eucharistic banquet the people of God are called together, with the bishop or, under his authority, a presbyter presiding in the person of Christ...” To these stipulations I will return.

### **Evangelization**

As Pope Benedict XVI ended his first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* he mentioned that the church has three essential functions which he named using ancient Greek terms: (1) *Marturia/Kerygma* – witness and proclamation; (2) *leiturgia* – worship; and (3) *diakonia* – service. These functions are not discrete but symbiotic since, to cite an example, worship is a form of witness as is service. These essential functions are interwoven in such a way that to isolate one from the other carries with it the danger of confusion. After all, the word “orthodoxy” means both right worship and right faith. To isolate service from worship and doctrine is to turn *diakonia* into philanthropy.

It is obvious that if the cathedral is to serve as the visible sign of Catholic unity it also must be a locus of doctrine, worship and service. Indeed, it should exhibit those three functions paradigmatically and symbiotically and, further, these functions ought to reflect

the episcopal office as well as refracting that office through those who minister in the cathedral.

### **Cathedral Ministers and Spirituality**

Obviously, almost all North American cathedrals function with a family of helpers in service to the episcopal *cathedra*: the presbyterate as well as those ministers who do everything from liturgical service, music, outreach, social services, education, and those many pastoral tasks which make up a contemporary church complex. My guess is that the staff as a whole from the rector on down are extremely busy people. The old scholastic saw is appropriate here: no one can give what one does not possess (*nemo dat quod non habet*). So the bottom line is this: if those who serve a cathedral in its various ministries do not have a robust sense of faith expressed in an explicit life of prayer, such persons run the risk of developing those common woes of our time: burnout, cynicism, compassion fatigue, the boredom of routine, and so on.

What follows are some broad generalizations apropos of a spirituality that has a particular resonance for those who are part of the cathedral family. My remarks are described as “broad” in the precise sense that they are applicable to the entire family attached to the cathedral.

*A spirituality appropriate for the cathedral family ought to take into account that the cathedral represents the unity of the bishop with his diocese in general and is Presbyterate in particular and the episcopal unity of all bishops including the bishop of Rome.*

This first point follows from my rather lengthy introductory remarks. I would not like to hazard particulars but the spirituality of the cathedral family ought to reflect in a

variety of ways that the family works with the bishop (and not merely *under* the bishop) is his pastoral ministry.

*Before all else, the shaping force of this spirituality ought to be grounded in the liturgical life of the cathedral.*

This is the function of that irreducible characteristic of the church stipulated by Benedict XVI in his first encyclical. The life of the church is fundamentally implicated in liturgy. Would it be too much of a stretch to argue that the cathedral liturgy should serve as a model and a wellspring for the entire diocese? The argument could be made is we remember that the bishop has a primary role as teacher of the faith and that teaching includes the necessity of acting paradigmatically.

*The cathedral family implicates itself in the magisterial role of the bishop.*

Again, to go back to the triad mentioned by Benedict, a second essential function within the church as a whole is to witness to the faith and to preach it – *marturia* and *kerygma*. A precise question, then, can be asked of this audience: how does the cathedral ministers cooperate in and further the magisterial function of the bishop? At the very least, it seems to me, the various pastoral tasks of catechetics, continuing education, homiletic services, and so on ought to reflect the great tradition of the church in an exemplary fashion.

Next, as we have already noted, the third function of the church is service (*diakonia*) and it is here precisely that the notion of service ramified out in various directions. The ministers must be in service to the bishop but also in service to those who cooperate in the bishop's ties to his clergy, to his other ministers, to his fellow bishops, and , of course to the People of God who live under the jurisdiction of the bishop.

However weighty that task may be it is also the case that the cathedral, more often than not, a parish, and must also serve the local congregation as well as those who live under its shadow even though those latter folk may not be Catholic. If the cathedral is not exemplary in terms of outreach of various sorts then it hardly models that *diakonia* which flow of necessity from authentic liturgy and solid teaching and witness.

Now it occurs to me that my listeners may think that I am asking for the cathedral community to be a “light shining on a hill” and, to a certain degree, that is true. However, I am not suggesting that the cathedral ministers be paragons of perfection that can be directly emulated or, worse, serve as a prophetic sign of rebuff to those places in the diocese which are not quite in the top drawer. What I do mean to insist, however, is that the cathedral community must aspire to some kind of leadership consonant with their proximity to the office of the bishop.

What that leadership means in concrete detail is hard to stipulate. After all, cathedrals vary widely in terms of their location, the congregation they serve, and the availability of the presence of the bishop himself who may or may not have a large area which he must serve.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, if the cathedral is to have an identity it must be more than a parish which happens to have a big church. It ought to be, in some sense, a “point of reference” for the diocese as a whole both in terms of the solemnity of its liturgy and its locus as an extension of the teaching office of the local bishop whose home it is. Accepting as a given that specific cathedrals in specific places vary in terms of their importance relative to the diocese as a whole, I will hazard a few suggestions, some in the

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<sup>6</sup> See: + George V. Murry, S.J. “Ministry in the Rust Belt: A Bishop’s Perspective,” *Woodstock Report* 95 (October, 2009) 1ff.

form of questions, about how the cathedral community might serve the diocese as a whole as an extension of episcopal ministry.

First: How does the local bishop himself see his service relative to his Episcopal seat which is the cathedral? In the patristic period, it was from the cathedra that the bishop regularly preached as the extant writings of Eastern relates like John Chrysostom and Western one like Ambrose and Augustine attest. After all, it was from the preaching of Ambrose that Augustine got his first clues about how to read the scriptures intelligently. Those clues came, as Augustine notes in the *Confessions* from Ambrose expostulating on scripture and II Cor 3 in particular” The Letter kills but the Spirit gives life.” How, realistically speaking, can we expect the local bishop to sustain and invigorate his fundamental duty to preach to his church from the cathedra?

Second: How does the ministerial staff aid in the work of this Episcopal obligation? This question goes back to the point raised earlier, namely, that the cathedra ought to be a point of reference for the unity of the local church best expressed in the celebration of Word and Eucharist. As a further extension of this point: we could inquire about how to understand preaching in the most capacious sense of the term so that it extends beyond the liturgical homily to preaching more widely understood. It is precisely here that one can make use of the imagination: would it be possible to hold a series of talks well advertised to draw in those who are inactive (“non practicing”) Catholics? Our local diocese has memorial celebrations for those who celebrate milestones in marriage – silver or golden anniversaries. Could they not be occasions for evangelization efforts? What about the regular celebration of Sunday Vespers advertised as a time of ecumenical welcome for those who are not parishioners? Examples of this sort could be multiplied.

Third: What is done in common for those who minister at the Cathedral itself – is it possible to have half days of recollection or things of that sort and could those occasions to highlight the communion of the entire “college” of ministers, the bishop included?

Fourth: Is the cathedral beautiful in the sense that it is welcoming, adorned with really rich devotional art, liturgically solemn, and prayerful in its atmosphere? To ask for beauty is not to ask for lavish display. Does it reflect the *via pulchritudinis* which I cited from the papal catechesis earlier in this presentation? “Beauty,” Dorothy Day loved to say, quoting Dostoevsky, “will save the world.” I was always struck by the fact that Thomas Merton recalled (in *The Seven Storey Mountain*) that what first attracted him to the Church was going into Corpus Christi Church on the upper West Side of New York City and seeing people praying. When I speak of beauty I am asking this: is the cathedral not only a place but a community of prayer energized by the place itself? While it is surely possible to pray anywhere and at any time it is also the case that there are “places of prayer” hallowed by memory, by historical significance, and by beauty. I think it would labor the obvious if I were forced to demonstrate that the cathedral ought to be a place worthy of the liturgy and as a place where prayer is invited.

### **Conclusion**

The suggestions and observations made above have about them the air of generality because of the very nature of the task set before me. Cathedrals and their ministers differ both according to locale and the culture within which they are located. The only constant thread I have been able to see as true as a generalization is this: the cathedral is inescapably linked to the *cathedra* – the place of the bishop within the order

of the church itself. Hence, it is necessary to base any remarks on the nature of the spirituality of cathedral ministries within the lineaments of the office of the bishop. If as *Lumen Gentium* (#21) says that the bishop “takes the place of Christ himself (as) teacher, shepherd, and priest and act as his representative...” says is true, then, it becomes critical to think of those who minister about his *cathedra* must somehow be a spiritual extension of who the bishop is and what he represents in that part of the church which is called a diocese.<sup>7</sup>

Let me end these reflections with a question posed by someone far more luminous than myself and the answer to the question posed. In his prayer of dedication at the opening of the temple in Jerusalem King Solomon prayed: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you much less this house which I have built. Have regard to your servant’s prayer and his plea. O Lord, my God, heeding the cry and the prayer your servant prays to you today that your eyes may be open day and night towards this house, the place of which you said ‘My name will be there’ that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays towards this place. Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards this place. O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive” (I Kings 8: 27-30).<sup>8</sup>

Thus Solomon, the paradigm of wisdom, asks, if God can dwell in a place made by human hands and to that question, he responds: God can dwell in such a place when God’s name and word be uttered there. Such a place is not only a place of prayer in general but the place where God hears us and forgives us. It is in that short prayer that we

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<sup>7</sup> The quotation from *LG* is cited in the Catechism at #1558 as part of the Episcopal office of teaching and ruling.

<sup>8</sup> NRSV translation.

find the deepest theological significance of the place called a cathedral and, by extension, for those who minister in it. The cathedral gets its full meaning in its utterance of the Name and Word of God and how that utterance is done is the perennial purpose and task of the cathedral ministers until all surround that heavenly place where the Lamb is seated on his throne.

[Lawrence S. Cunningham is John A. O'Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame.]